

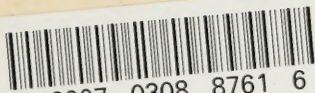
THE VIRGINIA of ELK CREEK VALLEY



BY MARY ELLEN CHASE



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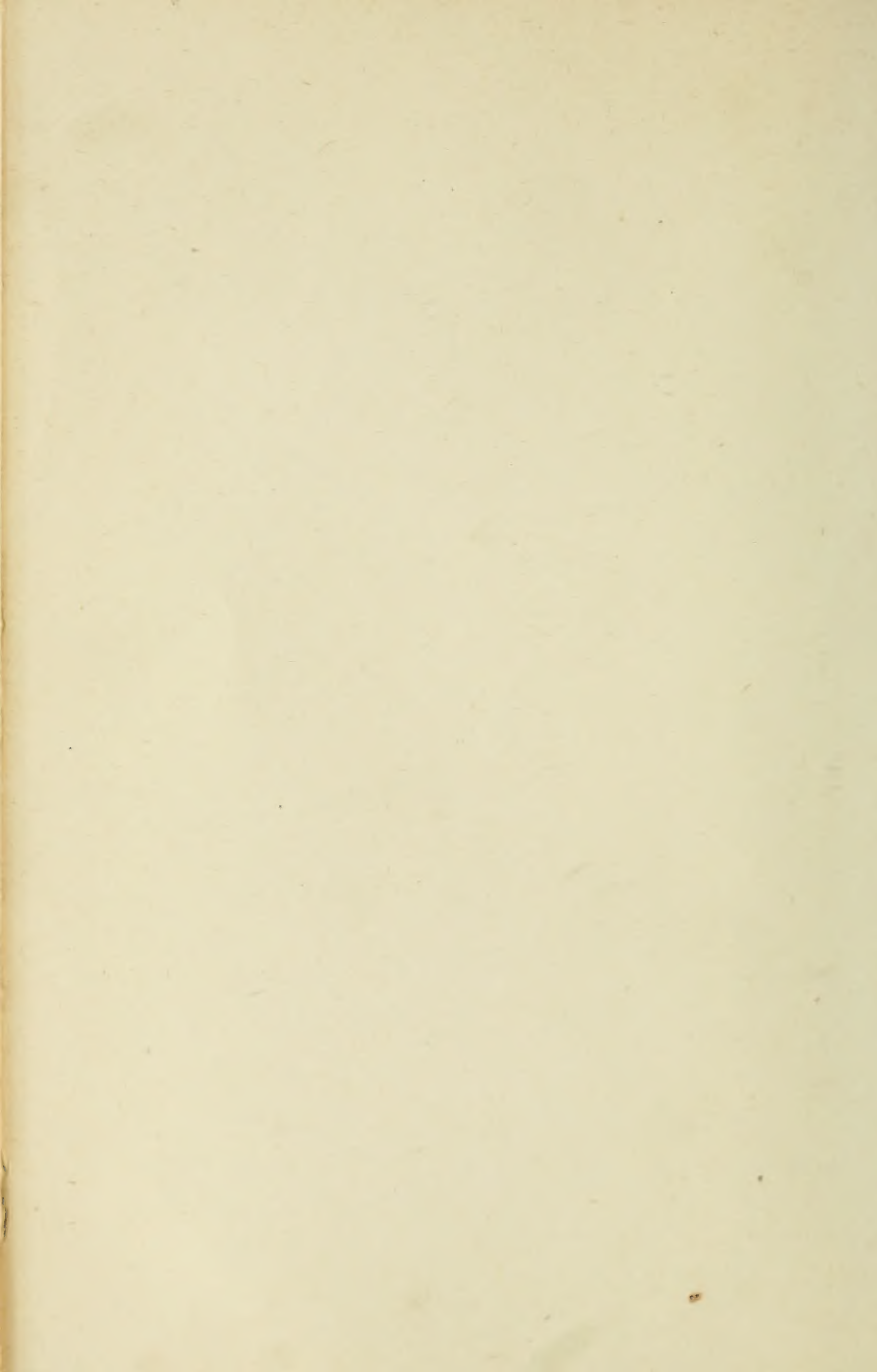
Sept 1921 -

14 years of age -

a lover of all animals.

Dogs, Cats &c

Spent years in Philadelphia High School



VIRGINIA OF ELK CREEK VALLEY

Stories by
MARY ELLEN CHASE




Each one volume
Cloth decorative, illustrated
Net, \$1.35; carriage paid, \$1.50



The Girl from the Big Horn
Country
Virginia of Elk Creek Valley



THE PAGE COMPANY
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"LOOKED ACROSS THE SAGEBRUSH STRETCHES TO THE MOUNTAINS" (See page 199)

VIRGINIA OF ELK CREEK VALLEY

By MARY ELLEN CHASE

Author of "The Girl from the Big Horn Country," etc.

Illustrated by
R. FARRINGTON ELWELL



THE PAGE COMPANY
BOSTON & MDCCCCXVII

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VIRGINIA OF ELK CREEK VALLEY

CHAPTER I

THE JOY OF ANTICIPATION

ELK CREEK VALLEY was a blue and golden place that mid-summer morning in the Big Horn Country. It seemed like a joyous secret tucked away among the mountains, whose hazy, far-away summits were as blue as the sky above them. The lower ranges, too, were blue from purple haze and gray-green sagebrush, while the bare, brown foothills tumbling about their feet were golden in the sunlight. Blue lupines and great spikes of mountain larkspur made of the Valley itself a garden which sloped gently to the creek, and lost itself in a maze

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of quaking-asps and cottonwoods. As for the creek waters, they ceased their tumultuous haste upon nearing the garden, and were content to move slowly so that they might catch and hold the sunlight in their amber depths. Beyond the creek, and through a gap in the foot-hills, the prairie stretched for miles—blue and green with oats and wheat and alfalfa. Now and then a mountain bluebird was lost to sight among the larkspur, and always a cloud of tiny blue butterflies circled above the creek.

Two pair of delighted eyes—one gray and the other blue—gazed upon the loveliness of everything as their owners watered a team of big bay horses at the ford. The gray eyes belonged to a girl of seventeen—a girl with golden-brown hair and cheeks glowing red through the tan of her eager, thoughtful face. She was radiant with happiness. It beamed from her eyes and lurked about the corners of her mouth. She seemed too excited to sit still. Now her gray eyes swept the prairie stretches, now scanned the mountains, now peered up the creek beneath the over-hanging trees. She was talking in short, eager sentences to her companion—the

owner of the blue eyes. He was a tall, clean, robust lad—a year older than she.

“Oh, Don,” she cried, “isn’t it wonderful? Just think! Our dream is really coming true! I used to say at school that even if it didn’t come true, we’d have the joy of dreaming it anyway. But it’s coming—this very day! And, oh, Don, isn’t this morning perfect? When I found in June they were really coming, I said I’d never be selfish enough to expect a *perfect* day, because it seemed as though I’d had enough already! But now it’s come, I just know it’s”—her voice softened—“it’s a real gift from God. Don’t you think so, too?”

“Yes, Virginia,” said the boy.

Then he gathered up the reins and drove his horses through the creek, and on toward the Gap and the open prairie.

“Don,” cried the girl, suddenly clutching his arm with one hand and pointing with the other, “there’s some wild bergamot just opening! I never knew it to be as early as this! And see! There’s a sunflower on the edge of the wheat field! There’ll be thousands of them soon! They’re like Priscilla!

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She has such big, brown eyes, and is always so merry and sunny. I know you'll like her, Don. And Mary? I think Mary's like the larkspur in the Valley, don't you? So independent, and sort of—of *self-resourceful*, as Miss Wallace says, and true. I wonder what Vivian's like? Oh, I know! The bluebells back there by the creek. They always must have a shady spot away from the hot sun. That's like Vivian, but she's dear just the same, and some day I really believe she'll be able to stand hard things as well as the rest of us. Tell me, Don, are you just as excited inside as I am?"

Donald Keith laughed.

"Of course, I am," he said, "only, you see, Virginia, I don't get so excited on the outside as you do. Fellows don't, I guess."

"I guess not," returned Virginia thoughtfully. "Father says I need you for a balance-wheel. He says he doesn't know what would happen if we both talked as much and got as excited as I do. You see, I'm seventeen now, and I think he wants me to begin to be a little more—more level-headed, and dignified. But I don't know how to begin. Things

just spring up inside of me, and they have to come out!"

"Don't try," said the boy bluntly. "I like you best just as you are, Virginia."

She sighed—a happy, little sigh.

"I'm glad," she said. "I don't know what I'd do if you didn't, Don. Think of all the good times we'd miss!"

They passed a little stream, hurrying on toward Elk Creek. Some quaking-asps made a shady spot where ferns grew.

"Just the spot for gentians in August," cried Virginia. "The girls will love them so! I'm going to try to send some to Miss Wallace. She'll be in Chicago, so maybe they'll go safely that distance. She's always told me so much about that wonderful blue color in the old Italian pictures. She says that no one has been able to make exactly that shade since. I told her I just knew our mountain gentians were that blue, and I'd send her some. My! I wish she were coming, too! She's so lovely! I hope, when I grow to be her age, I'll be at least just a tiny bit like her. You'd like her, Don."

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"I'd like her anyway for being such a peach to you," said Donald.

"I'll never forget it," Virginia told him, a little break in her voice. "And especially when—when Jim went—Somewhere Else. Oh, Don, she was so good to me at that time! And she seemed to understand everything! I'll always love her for it!"

Her gray eyes filled with tears. The boy beside her placed his hand on hers in quick sympathy.

"I know," he said. "We don't find a friend like that every day, Virginia. I wish she were coming, too! I'd like to thank her myself."

Virginia swallowed the lump in her throat and smiled again.

"I wish so, too, but she can't, so we must make the best of it. Aunt Nan is next best. She'll love everything! I know she will. She's such a good sport, too! She'll learn to ride and shoot, I'm sure. I hope she'll want to go everywhere with us, and that we won't seem too young for her."

"I think Malcolm may go along some—at least before threshing starts. He said he would.

Isn't he about your Aunt Nan's age? He's most thirty."

"Yes," said Virginia. "I never thought of it before, but I guess he is. Aunt Nan's thirty, I know, because I remember she told me she'd always sort of dreaded being thirty, but now she'd reached there she found it the most comfortable age in the world. I hope Malcolm will go along. He's splendid!"

"He's all right," returned Donald loyally.

"Every one's been so dear at home about getting ready," Virginia went on. "William put the finishing touches on the flower garden yesterday. It looks lovely, and Aunt Nan's marigolds are all in bloom. William planted some to make her think of home. And Alec and Joe and Dick insisted on riding three of the horses so they'd be ready for the girls to ride to-morrow. Hannah's baked everything I like best, and Father bought two brand-new tents, because the girls want to sleep out with me. Do Jack and Carver ride, do you suppose?"

"Jack does a little. Of course, I don't know about Carver Standish. You think he'll fit in all

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right, don't you, Virginia? Eastern fellows don't sometimes, you know."

"Oh, I'm sure he will," Virginia assured him. "I wish you could have seen how pleased he was when Father asked him to come. And his grandfather, the old Colonel, nearly burst with pride! Of course Carver's different. I think his father and mother are very—well, *New Englandy*! You know what I mean. But I'm sure he'll love it out here. It's lovely of you to have him at your house, Don. He could stay with us as well as not, of course, but he'll be happier over there with you and Jack and the boys."

"That's all right," said Donald carelessly. "There's always room for one more at the Keith ranch. Father says there always will be. Are all the girls Vigilantes, Virginia—Mary and Priscilla and Vivian?"

Virginia explained. Mary wasn't really a member, and yet she really was, being the advisor of the society, and general assistant whenever called upon to help.

"It certainly was a clever scheme," said Donald.

"No one but you would ever have thought of such a thing, Virginia."

Virginia discredited his praise.

"Oh, yes," she told him. "Priscilla would have done it every bit as well, only she'd never heard of the Vigilantes. You see, no one in New England knows about them—even Miss Wallace who knows almost everything—and when I told Priscilla the things they stood for years ago, and the work they did against evil-doers out here in the pioneer days, we both thought it would be just the thing to name our society after them. You see, Don, we *had* to do something! 'Twas necessary with Imogene influencing Dorothy and Vivian the way she did, and I've discovered that when a thing just *has* to be done, there's always some one to do it. Oh, Don, see the wind blowing over the grain! It looks almost like the real sea from Priscilla's house—all blue-green and wavy—only I love the prairie sea better. Won't they all just love it? It's such a big country! I'm getting excited again. That queer feeling inside has come back, and it's a whole hour before we get there, and before the train comes in."

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"What do you suppose they're doing now?" asked Donald, excited in his turn.

"I suppose," began Virginia—"oh, Don, there's another bergamot!—I suppose they're all out on the observation platform, looking at everything they can see. Mary isn't saying much—she's just looking, and Vivian is surprised at all the new sights—I can just see how round and blue her eyes are!—and Aunt Nan is pointing out things, so as to be sure no one will miss one of them. Somehow I can't exactly picture Jack and Carver, but I *know* what Priscilla is doing. I don't even have to imagine or suppose. I know she's just wild—outside and in! I can just see her jumping from one side of the platform to the other, and exclaiming at everything. Her hair is all blown about her face—she has such unruly hair anyway—and her eyes are almost black, she's so excited over being so near. You see, I know Priscilla. She's a lot like me. She just can't keep still when she's happy! I know she's got the same queer feeling inside that I have. Oh, drive faster, Don! I just don't believe I *can* wait to see them all!"

CHAPTER II

THE ARRIVAL

VIRGINIA HUNTER was right. Priscilla Winthrop, her roommate at St. Helen's, and junior partner in the formation of the Vigilante Order, had not been still for ten minutes since five A. M. At that hour she had risen from bed, dressed hurriedly, and bribed the sleepy porter to allow her a seat on the observation platform. It was contrary to custom and orders at that hour, but he had done it notwithstanding. Apparently this young lady would take no refusal.

Priscilla had moved her chair to the extreme rear of the platform that nothing on either side might escape her eager eyes. She had watched the sun rise from behind the first mountain spurs, and gild their barren summits and sagebrush-covered sides. They looked so gaunt and lonely standing there, she thought, like great gods guarding the entrance

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to an enchanted land. Between her and them stretched the plains—here white with alkali, there barren with sparse sagebrush. Not infrequently the train rumbled across a little creek or irrigation ditch around which cottonwoods grew and grass was green. In these fertile spots there were always rude houses of logs with outlying shacks and corrals. Priscilla had shuddered at the thought of living in such places. These must be other pioneers, she said to herself, whose ancestors Virginia delighted to honor. Well, they most certainly deserved it!

She had hardly kept her seat at all. There was constantly something on one side or the other which attracted her attention, and she darted right and left much to the amusement of the brakeman who sat within the car and watched her. As they hurried through one of the irrigated spots, she heard a bird sing—a clear, jubilant, rollicking song. Could it be the meadow-lark of which Virginia had always spoken? At six they had passed through a prairie-dog town, whose inhabitants had thus far existed for Priscilla only in books and in Virginia's stories.

Her fascinated eyes spied the little animals, as for one instant they stood upright to survey this rude and noisy intruder, and then darted into their house doorways. She had knocked over two camp chairs in her excited efforts to reach the brakeman, and assure herself that they were really prairie dogs.

But the climax had occurred shortly afterward when while going through a country of sagebrush stretches and grim, almost naked buttes, she had seen—actually seen a *cow boy*! He was true to every description Virginia had ever given her—sombrero, bandana, chaps and all! She could not see his face, but she knew he must be fine-looking like the “Virginian” or like Dick at the Hunter ranch. He was galloping through the sagebrush on a mottled, ugly-looking broncho, doubtless bent on some secret errand.

Priscilla was seized with half a dozen impulses as she watched him. Should she hurry through four cars and tell the others that they might see him also? Should she send the porter? How any one could sleep at such a time as this was far beyond her com-

prehension! But she had remained, rooted at last to one spot, and watched him until he was lost to sight. How would it seem, she wondered, to gallop alone through this country? She hoped the cow boy had noticed the sun rise over the buttes; she hoped that even now he was not blind to the great mountains in the distance, which were reaching their blue summits toward the sky.

She drew a long breath of the thin, clear mountain air! So this was Virginia's country! It *was* a big land! She understood now what Virginia had meant by talking about the bigness of everything. The plains, stretching on and on, gray-green with sagebrush, the gaunt mountain spurs, the far-away real mountains, blue and snow-furrowed, the great, clear sky over all! It must be wonderful at night with countless stars and a moon looking down upon the loneliness of everything. There was something about it all that, in some strange way, pulled out one's very soul—that made one want to be big in thought, tolerant, kind!

The brakeman, perhaps alarmed at seeing his interesting passenger actually standing still, had joined

her at that moment. Priscilla pointed to a speck in the sagebrush—the vanishing cow boy.

“A real cow boy!” she shouted above the rumble of the wheels.

“Humph!” grunted her companion. “Didn’t you never see one before?”

“Never!” cried Priscilla fervently.

“It ain’t no great sight!” returned the sophisticated brakeman.

“Perhaps not to you,” Priscilla shouted in his ear, “but it would be if you had dreamed of seeing one for ten months and three-quarters the way I have.”

“Humph!” grunted the brakeman again. “You must be a tenderfoot.”

“I am,” cried Priscilla, “and I’m glad of it! You can only see bran-new things once. The second time you see them they aren’t new any longer, and can’t give you thrills like the first time.”

The brakeman grinned.

“There’s some yucca,” he shouted, pointing to a tall, straight plant with white, bell-shaped flowers growing by the track.

"What's that?" screamed the interested Priscilla.

"Sometimes folks call it Indian soap-weed," explained the brakeman in her ear, "because if you break the leaves they'll lather in water. And some folks call it Spanish bayonet. It grows in barren places out here."

"I'll put that in my Thought Book," Priscilla told him. "I guess it's lucky I have a new one with all these new things to write about. Why are all the trees out here those tall cottonwoods?"

"They ain't all," answered the obliging brakeman, "but the cottonwoods don't take so much soil. They grow easy and quick, and make good wind-breaks, so folks plant 'em when they build a house near a creek like that one over there. Quaking-asps—they grow well, too."

"Quaking-asps!" cried Priscilla. "Where are they? Please show me! I'd give worlds to see one! My roommate lives out here—I'm just on my way to visit her—and it's her favorite tree."

"You don't have to give nothin'," shouted her companion dryly. "There's plenty of 'em right along this creek we're passing. They're them little trees

with light green trunks and trembly leaves. They grow by creeks and in springy places mostly."

Priscilla leaned over the railing and gazed.

"Oh, aren't they happy? They're the jolliest trees I ever saw!"

"I guess that is a good word for 'em," agreed the brakeman. "They sure do dance around."

"Doesn't anything grow on those hills but little trees and sagebrush?" queried Priscilla. "It is sagebrush, isn't it? I guessed it was from pictures, and from what Virginia said."

"Yes, it's sagebrush, ma'am, and nothin' much grows on them buttes except that and rattlers."

"Oh!" screamed Priscilla. "That's one thing I'd hate to see! You don't think I will, do you?"

"Like's not," encouraged the brakeman. "They ain't so bad. Must come in handy for something, else we wouldn't have 'em."

Just then Carver Standish had opened the door for Aunt Nan, who announced breakfast for the party. Priscilla was obdurate.

"Miss Webster," she remonstrated, "please don't make me eat! I simply couldn't do it! I've had the

most wonderful morning of my whole life. I've seen prairie-dogs and yucca and quaking-asps and a cow boy, and I know I heard a meadow-lark. This gentleman has taught me all kinds of things."

The brakeman touched his hat.

"He's been very kind, I'm sure," said Aunt Nan, too used to her own niece's methods of making new friends to be troubled. "But we're going to reach Virginia and Donald in another hour, and you must have some breakfast, Priscilla."

"Carver will bring me some fruit," persisted Priscilla, "and you can't see a thing from the window. Oh, please, Miss Webster! I just can't eat when I have this queer feeling inside of me!"

So Priscilla had been left in peace, much against the better judgment of the chaperone; and now at nine o'clock, the three Vigilantes with Aunt Nan, Jack Williams and Carver Standish III viewed Virginia's country together and all for the first time. The picture which Virginia was at that very moment painting for Donald was very accurate—even to detail. Aunt Nan, eager that no one should miss a thing, kept pointing out this and that feature of

interest—the strange, new flowers by the track, the occasional log houses, the irrigation ditches, so new to them all. Vivian sat quietly in one corner—her eyes big, round, almost frightened. The endless stretches of country, the lonely barren places, and the great mountains somehow scared Vivian. It was the loneliest country she had ever seen, she told Aunt Nan. Mary Williams said nothing, but her dark blue eyes roamed delightedly from prairie to foot-hills, and from the foot-hills to the mountains, where they lingered longest. In all her dreams she had never pictured anything so big and wonderful as this. Jack and Carver stood together by the railing, and let nothing escape their eager eyes; while Priscilla, forgetting to eat Carver Standish's banana, hurried from one to another with eager explanations gained from her morning's experience.

In half an hour they would be there. Already the barren stretches had given place to acres and acres of grain, across which were comfortable ranch-houses, set about by cottonwoods. Beyond the grain-fields rose the foot-hills—open ranges where hundreds of cattle were feeding, and far above the

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foot-hills towered the mountains in all their blue-clad mystery.

"There's the creek bridge!" cried Priscilla, springing to her feet a few minutes later. "Virginia has written me a dozen times that when we crossed that red bridge we should begin to get ready. I suppose I ought to comb my hair. It's a sight! But Virginia'll be so happy she'll never notice in all this world!"

Virginia was assuredly too happy to notice disheveled heads or smoke-stained faces or wrinkled suits when she saw her own dear Aunt Nan and her very best friends step excitedly from the train onto the little station platform. That queer sinking feeling inside vanished, and only joy was left.

"It's come true! It's come true!" she kept crying as she greeted them all. "Just think, Priscilla, it's really happening this minute! You're all in my country at last—Donald's and mine!"

So the world looked very beautiful to them all as they drove homeward. The three boys on the front seat became acquainted and re-acquainted, while the Vigilantes and Aunt Nan behind held one another's

hands and asked question after question of the happy Virginia. No, she told them, the days weren't all as perfect, but most of them were. Yes, the sun-flowers grew wild all in among the grain. No, there were no snakes very near. Yes, it was truly sixty-five miles away to the farthest mountains. No, she had never been so happy in all her life.

They stopped at the Keith ranch to receive a copyrighted Western welcome, and to leave Jack and Carver. Donald would drive the girls home, and then return. Mr. David, Mother Mary, Malcolm and little Kenneth—all the Keith family—came to greet them. It seemed to Jack Williams as though he had never received a welcome so genuine; and to the hungry and tired Carver Standish III the simple brown ranch-house, surrounded by cottonwoods and set about by wide grain-fields, possessed a charm unsurpassed by the most stately mansions of New England.

The Vigilantes and Aunt Nan received as genuine a welcome a half hour later when they drove down the long avenue of cottonwoods to Virginia's home. It came not only from a tall, bronzed man, who

shared his little daughter's joy, but also from a white-aproned, kind-faced woman in the doorway, and a quiet, stooped man by Aunt Nan's marigolds.

"I know it's Hannah," cried Priscilla, running to the doorway. "She looks just as though she knew all about the German measles!"

"And I'm sure this is William," said Mary a little shyly, as she shook hands with the quiet man by the garden. "It just couldn't be—any one else!"

CHAPTER III

THE GETTING-ACQUAINTED TRIP

"If—if you'll excuse me, Virginia, I'd—I'd really rather stay at home with Hannah and your father."

It was Vivian who spoke. She was clad in a new riding-suit, which had been worn only during a few trembling and never-to-be-forgotten moments of the day before, when Donald had led the oldest and safest horse on the ranch to and fro beneath the cottonwoods. Old Siwash would never have thrown Vivian. Far was it from him to treat a guest of his mistress in that manner. But in spite of stirrups, saddle-horn, and the reassuring presence of Donald, Vivian had, in some mysterious way, slipped from the saddle, and fallen in an ignominious little heap by the wayside.

It had been more ignominious to have Priscilla and Mary, who had themselves been riding but an hour, come cantering—actually *cantering*—up with

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Virginia to see if she were hurt. She almost wished she had been hurt. If her leg had been broken, or old Siwash had kicked, or even her face been cut just a little, she might have been regarded not exactly as a heroine, perhaps, but as a martyr at least. However, nothing was broken except her spirit; old Siwash had stood stock-still; and her face had shown no sign of anything save fright and dirt. The whole situation was quite too much to be borne, and did not need the disdainful glance which the critical blue eyes of Carver Standish had cast upon her.

The Vigilantes had been lovely as they led their horses and walked to the house with her; Aunt Nan, who had had her first lesson with Malcolm Keith that morning, was comforting; Mr. Hunter encouraging; and Donald the finest boy she had ever known in her life. It had really seemed as though, with them all to stand by her, she could mount again the next morning and go on the much-dreamed of getting-acquainted trip to Lone Mountain. But now the time to go had come, and her courage had fled. She had beckoned Virginia from the corral where

the men were saddling the horses, and drawn her away to a secluded spot. Virginia did not need Vivian's confession. Her frightened face was quite enough.

"I—I just can't do it, Virginia!" she finished.

Virginia considered for a long moment. Then her clear gray eyes met Vivian's frightened blue ones.

"Vivian," she said, "perhaps you'll be angry with me for speaking so plainly to you, but I've just got to do it. If you don't want the Vigilantes to be dead ashamed of you, here's your chance this minute! I believe way down in my heart that things come to us so that we can show what's really in us—how—how far down we've been putting our roots into good soil, you know. Now this has come to you! There isn't a thing to be afraid of except just Fear, which I admit is a monster; but if you let that control you, you'll spoil your whole life. Jim used to teach me that. Siwash wouldn't hurt a baby! I rode him when I was four years old. We're just going to trail up the mountain as slowly as can be, and Don will ride with you every minute. When

there are really things to be afraid of, people excuse a coward; but when there isn't a thing in this world, they don't! So if you don't come, Vivian, and show us what you are made of, you're a *coward inside*, that's all!"

It was hard, blunt doctrine, built on seventeen years of wholesome life in a land where cowardice has found no room; but at that moment it was just what Vivian Winters needed. From her frightened heart the fear of Siwash fled only to give place to a more dreadful fear, the contempt and scorn of the Vigilantes. Better be thrown by Siwash than despised by Virginia and Priscilla, Mary and the far-away Dorothy. She had no time to tell Virginia that she would go after all, and to ask her to try to forget her cowardice, for the boys called just then that all was ready. But Virginia understood, for as they hurried toward the corral she held Vivian's hand closely in her own, and gave it a final, encouraging squeeze, as Vivian edged a cautious way toward Siwash and the faithful Donald.

After all, it was not so hard. Donald allowed the others to go ahead—the two pack-horses first with

tents and provisions, for they were to camp for the night, then Malcolm, Aunt Nan and the others. He and Vivian, riding slowly, brought up the rear. Vivian, determination rising in her soul, was firmly seated and clutching the saddle-horn. She might be thrown, but she would never, never fall again! But old Siwash was faithful to his trust, and Donald was close at hand. Vivian vowed inwardly that she would always bless Donald. Under his calm assurance, her fear gradually went away, and in fifteen minutes she was willing to let go her hold upon the saddle-horn, and to try to follow his instructions. He taught her how to place her feet in the stirrups, how to clutch with her knees, how to rise in the saddle for a trot, how to sit back for a canter; until at length—wonder of wonders!—Vivian, her hair flying in the wind, her eyes filled with triumph, actually *cantered* with Donald at her side toward the others, who to a rider turned in their saddles and cheered her approach. And pride filled every one's eyes—even the critical ones of Carver Standish III.

So now that the worst was over, no one enjoyed the trip more than Vivian. She kept wondering

what her timid mother would say could she see her daughter in the suit which hours of pleading had with difficulty procured, and on a real Western horse, riding past the grain-fields, up the canyon, and on into the trail that led up the mountain-side.

Only three of the nine had ever ridden through a canyon or followed a mountain trail, and those three experienced the keenest delight in pointing out every object of interest to the others—the blue lupines and pink cranesbill, which made the occasional open spaces riotous with color, the forget-me-nots growing in shady places, and the rare orchids, which they discovered after they had penetrated to the heart of the mountain forest.

It was beautiful in among the timber. Great spruces and pines towered above them like masts to the journeying earth. The sunlight fell in shimmering, golden patches upon the moss-grown and leaf-covered ground. In the more open places grew buckbrush and the service-berry, Oregon grape with its holly-shaped leaves, blue lupines, Indian paintbrush and great mountain ferns. It was very still when they stopped their horses to rest. Only the



“ THE TRAIL WOUND IN AND OUT AROUND THE MOUNTAIN-
SIDE ”

wind in the great trees above them, the chatter of a squirrel remonstrating against this intrusion into his solitude, a strange sad bird-note farther up the mountain, and the occasional fall of a leaf or creak of a limb as it rubbed shoulders with its neighbor, broke the silence. Once in a clearing a deer and her fawn gazed at them with wondering eyes before leaping through the ferns into the safe shelter of the timber.

Up—up—up they went. The trail wound in and out around the mountain-side, and their sure-footed horses followed it, never daunted by fallen trees or by rocky and precipitous places. More than once every Vigilante save one held her breath as she was carried up a dangerous, almost obliterated path to heights beyond. But Virginia's Pedro, who was far-famed as a trailer, led the way, and his rider called back reassuring words to those behind.

By noon the air was cold. They were near snow, Malcolm said. A few minutes more and they had reached it—a veritable snow-bank in late July. The Vigilantes, reënforced by Aunt Nan, challenged the boys to a snow-ball fight, and they all dismounted

for the fray. Then came dinner of Hannah's sandwiches, and bacon and eggs cooked over a little friendship fire beyond the snow.

An hour later they reached the mountain-top, and lo! it was spring again. The ground was covered with early spring flowers—shooting-stars and spring beauties and bearded-tongues. In the sheltered nooks they found dog-toothed violets, and more forget-me-nots—both pink and blue.

It was here that the inexperienced New Englanders longed to camp. They wanted to wake in the morning, they said, and look far across the blue distances, over the tops of the highest trees, to the mountains beyond, like Moses gazing into the Promised Land. But they willingly consented to ride down on the other side to a more sheltered spot and camp by a tiny mountain lake, when Malcolm, aided by Donald and Virginia, explained that a snow-storm was not an unlikely occurrence away up there—even in July!

It was strange to sit around the big camp-fire that night after supper—all alone in a mountain wilderness; strange to rehearse school incidents and to

listen to Malcolm's stories of hunting for elk and antelope in that very spot; strangest of all to go to sleep on pine boughs and blankets which the boys had spread in their tents. The weird, lonesome cry of the coyotes startled more than one sleeping Vigilante that night, and Vivian nestled closer beneath Aunt Nan's protecting arm. It was not until the next morning when they started for home that they knew of the bear, who, smelling the ham and bacon, had wandered into camp, only to be repulsed by Malcolm and an extra log on the fire.

In that strange, just-before-dawn stillness Virginia awoke to miss Priscilla from her side. She moved the tent flap, and looked out. Priscilla stood by the entrance, her eyes raised to the distant mountains—great shadows beneath a star-strewn sky. She was learning the old, old secrets of those mountains at night.

"I couldn't help it, Virginia," she whispered, as she crept back a few moments later. "I've wanted so to see what it was like at night, and now I know. It's bigger than ever! I don't believe that any one could look at the mountains and the stars and ever

be doubtful about—God and—and—things like that, do you?”

The next day, perfect as the one before, they went down, down, down the trail, through the canyon, across the prairie, and home once more.

“Mr. Hunter named it just right,” Priscilla said to Dick, who came to take the horses. “I’ve never felt so well-acquainted in my life!”

CHAPTER IV

THE BEAR CANYON BEAR

"GEE!" cried Alden Winthrop. "I wish I was out there!"

"So do I!" echoed his brother John.

"I wish I *were*, dear," corrected his mother.

"Well, *were*, then, Mother. There isn't much difference in the way you say it. I wish I was there anyway!"

His mother sighed, but Alden's thoughts were far from English grammar. Instead, they were centering upon the contents of a fat letter from his sister Priscilla, which his father had just read.

"I've got more respect for Priscilla than I ever had in all my life," he continued. "I never supposed she'd have sand enough to go on a bear hunt. Now, if she'd just shot the bear herself, it would be——"

"Why, Alden!" interrupted his mother. "Imagine Priscilla doing a thing like that! You don't

suppose, do you, dear," she continued, turning to Mr. Winthrop, who was reading his daughter's letter for a second time while he finished his breakfast, "you don't suppose Priscilla is really handling a gun herself?"

"Sounds like it to me," said Priscilla's father as he turned the pages. "She says, 'I can knock a bottle all to pieces at thirty yards. Don't you call that pretty good?' "

"I'd like to know the size of the bottle before replying," commented John.

"Dear me!" said Mrs. Winthrop anxiously. "I'm willing she should ride horseback and climb mountains and camp in a perfect wilderness if that's what Western people term pleasure, but I do wish she wouldn't shoot a gun! I'm afraid I shan't have a minute's real peace till she gets home. Of course I know she's in the best of hands, but accidents are so common. Just yesterday I was reading where——"

"Now, Mother!" remonstrated the boys.

"Don't worry for a moment, Mother," reassured Mr. Winthrop. "She'll come home safe and sound.

I'll trust those good people out there to look after her." He turned the pages again. "She's certainly having the time of her life! Makes me wish I were young again myself!"

"That skin will look splendid in the library," said Alden. "Read again what she says about sending it, Dad."

"Read it all, Dad!" suggested John. "There's plenty of time."

Priscilla's father willingly complied. He evidently shared his sons' pride in his daughter's achievement.

"HUNTER RANCH, WYOMING,

"July 26, 19—

"DEAR FOLKS AT HOME:

"I am covered with dust and dirt and just dead tired, but I can't wash or dress, or even rest until I tell you the most thrilling experience of my whole life! I, Priscilla Winthrop of Boston, Massachusetts, have helped to trap and kill a bear! I know shivers are running down your back as you read this. Imagine then what it must

have been to live through the *real thing*! To ride up the trail all eagerness and excitement; to visit the empty traps and turn away disappointed; to see your horse as you neared the third suddenly prick up his ears and rear——’ ”

“Dear me!” cried Mrs. Winthrop. “I’m sure, John, those horses out there aren’t well-broken!”

Mr. Winthrop nodded reassuringly, and continued:

“To hear Dick call back that there must surely be a bear; and, at last, to come upon the infuriated monster, dragging his trap about, gnashing his teeth, and trying to reach you!” ”

“Oh, dear!” moaned poor Mrs. Winthrop.

“Go ahead!” cried the boys.

“I trust you are now in the atmosphere to appreciate my story.

“I wrote you this morning about the lovely getting-acquainted trip to Lone Mountain. Well, I had just come back from walking down to the main road and giving my letter to the carrier,

who drives in a funny little canvas house on wheels, when Dick and William rode up to the door and asked if we girls didn't want to ride up into the mountains back of Bear Canyon and visit the bear-traps. Mr. Hunter and the three boys had gone to Willow Creek, but it's a fifty mile ride over there and back, and he thought it was too much for Mary and Vivian and me—much as we wanted to go.' ”

“Fifty miles on horseback!” murmured Mrs. Winthrop. “I should hope so!”

“ ‘Virginia had insisted on staying with us, and Aunt Nan (we all call her that now) had gone to Mystic Lake with Donald's brother, so we four girls were all alone. Virginia said “Yes” on the spot, and Mary and I were wild at the prospect. Vivian's eyes got big when Dick said “bear-traps,” but she wouldn't let us know she was afraid. Really, you'd be surprised at what a good sport Vivian's getting to be.

“ ‘We said we'd be ready in a minute and hurried into our riding clothes while Dick and Wil-

liam went to saddle our horses. All the time we kept fairly *pelting* Virginia with questions. *Where were the traps? What did they look like? Did she really think we'd get a bear?* She wouldn't tell us much of anything, except that bears were not uncommon at all, and that the men liked to get them, because they were a nuisance to the cattle. I think we were all seized with different feelings as we got ready. Vivian's came out and sat upon her face. You just knew she was hoping every bear in the Rockies had been safe at home for a week; Mary kept saying the trip up the trail would be so beautiful, but something told you she was secretly hoping for a greater adventure; and I—well, I couldn't decide between the triumph of bringing a real bear home, and the awfulness of seeing one caught and killed.

“‘In half an hour we were off. Hannah had given us each some sandwiches in a bundle, which we rolled in our slickers and tied on our saddles. Dick carried the big gun in a holster, and William a coil of rope. Instead of turning off on the Lone Mountain trail we went farther up the canyon,

past the little school-house where Virginia used to go, and on toward where the canyon walls were great cliffs instead of foot-hills. It certainly was the *beariest-looking* place I have ever seen. You could just imagine hundreds of them taking sun-baths on the rocks, surrounded by their devoted families.

“ ‘By and by we turned into a rocky, precipitous trail, and went higher and higher. It was much steeper than on the getting-acquainted trip. Sometimes it just seemed as though the horses couldn’t make it, but they did. My horse is a perfect wonder! He never hesitates at anything. His name is Cyclone!’ ”

“I trust it has nothing to do with his disposition,” interrupted Mrs. Winthrop.

“ ‘At noon we were in a perfect wilderness of huge trees, great jagged rocks, and thickets almost as bad as the one Theseus went through to reach Ariadne. William insisted on building a tiny fire to cook bacon, so we rustled some dry sticks and made a little one on a flat rock. I

never in all my life tasted anything so good as that bacon and Hannah's sandwiches and some ice-cold water from a little creek that was tearing down the mountain-side.

"Dick said as we rested for a moment that it would take us fifteen minutes to reach the first trap from that spot. It was the most likely place of the three to find a bear, he added, and at that Mary, Vivian, and I tried our best to look as unconcerned as though catching a bear were the most usual thing in all the world. But when we had reached the place, after a hard ride through a narrow trail bordered by all kinds of prickly things, we found no bear in the queer little log-house that held the trap. Neither was there one in the trap a mile distant.

"When we turned away from the second, bearless and tired, every one of us, except perhaps Vivian, felt a sense of defeat. My fears of seeing one caught had vanished. I had borne sunburn and scratches and lameness and I wanted a bear. So did Mary. She was not content with just scenery. Virginia had caught bears before,

but she wanted one because we did, and William wanted one because Virginia did. William never seems to want much for himself some way, but he loves Virginia, and I think Virginia loves him next best to Jim. As for Dick—there was no mistaking Dick's feeling. He felt as though he had not done his duty by us since there had been no bear in the two most likely traps.

“‘The question before the assembly now was—Should we or should we not visit the third trap? It might be dark, William said, before we got out of the canyon, and there wasn't one chance in a hundred of a bear anyway. Virginia—really, she is the biggest peach I ever knew!—proposed that she ride home with Vivian, and the others of us go on with Dick and William, but Vivian would not listen to her. There having been no bears in the first two traps was proof enough for Vivian that there would be none in the last, and her bravery returned. Mary wanted to go on, and I wouldn't have gone home for a thousand dollars or a trip abroad! As for Dick, he was already half-way up the trail.

“ ‘This trail was far steeper than either of the others. It led almost straight up the mountain-side beneath over-hanging trees, under fallen timber, and through every kind of bramble imaginable. But there was something exhilarating about even the brambles—something that made you glad to hear the saddle crunch and whine and creak, and to feel yourself being carried higher and higher. It wasn’t all the hope of a bear either!

“ ‘At last we came to a little creek, which was hurling itself down over the rocks.

“ “ ‘Moose Creek!’ Dick called back. “The trap’s one-half a mile farther on.”

“ ‘On we went, growing more and more excited every moment. Something strange seemed to be in the air. I don’t know what it was, but the horses must have felt it, too, for just as we had cleared an especially thick thicket, my Cyclone began to prick up his ears and to sniff the air, and Dick’s horse reared. Then, in a moment, the others began to be restive. Even old Siwash, who is lame and halt and maimed and blind like the

parable people at the feast, actually jumped, much to Vivian's horror.

" 'I just wish you could have felt the shivers and thrills and quivers that ran down our backs when Dick halted the procession and cried,

" "There's a bear around all right! The horses smell him! We'll turn back and tie, and then go on foot!"

" 'Five minutes more and we were stumbling up the trail—Dick and William ahead, Virginia and I next, and Mary and Vivian in the rear. I don't know where my heart was, but I know it was unfastened, for I distinctly felt it in a dozen different places! Vivian had actually forgotten to be frightened, and Mary kept saying over and over again, "Just think of it! Just think of it! A bear! Just think of it!" As for Virginia, she strode along with her head high, just as she always does, and looked as though she were able to cope with any grizzly on earth.

" 'We gained the clearing almost as soon as Dick and William, and—now, listen, all of you!—there was our bear!!! I'll never forget that mo-

ment! I don't believe I'll ever in my life experience so many different feelings—triumph and pity and fear and admiration, all struggling together. The poor thing lay in the hot sun by the creek, rods from the little log house which had concealed the trap, and one of his forelegs was securely held in that cruel, iron grip. A long, strong chain attached to some logs held the trap secure, though bark was torn in layers and strips from the trees near by, whose trunks the poor, mad, suffering animal had climbed—trap, chain, and all. But now—nearly worn out—he lay in the creek, sick at heart and ready to die.

“‘As Dick drew the big gun from the holster, and went nearer, the bear rose to his feet and growled—a fierce, awful growl that sent Vivian trembling to the thicket. All I could think of just then was Roland keeping at bay the Saracens at Roncesvalles, or Leonidas withstanding the Persians at Thermopylæ. There was something grand in the way that big bear faced Dick. I shall always admire him for it as long as I live. I rather believe he was glad to die as Leonidas

and Roland were—secure in the thought that his spirit could never be overcome.

“William turned his back as Dick raised the big gun, and made ready to shoot. Then he said something about seeing to the horses, and hurried down the trail. Mary joined Vivian in the thicket, and so did I. I couldn't help it. We turned our backs, too, and stopped our ears with our fingers. Virginia was the only one who stayed. She stood by Dick as he aimed and shot. Afterward she told me she would have felt mean to desert a hero whose spirit was just about to be taken away from him. She wanted to pay her last respects. But I know it wasn't easy, for when we all came tremblingly back a few minutes after Dick had shot, her eyes were brimful of tears.

“Then William, too, returned, leading Siwash, and together he and Dick hoisted the big bear across Siwash's saddle, binding him securely with the rope. After the horses had become satisfied that there was no occasion for alarm, William led Siwash at the head of a triumphal procession, and the rest of us followed, Vivian on William's Gin-

ger. Down the trail we went, unconscious of scratches and aches and sunburn, now that our aim had been accomplished, and our goal realized. The awful feeling of pity which we had felt by the creek went away somewhere, and we were but victors holding a triumph.

“‘Virginia and I wondered as we rode along together why it is that you can feel so full of pity one moment at the thought of killing something, and yet so full of triumph the next after you’ve conquered and killed it. We’ve decided that the triumphant feeling is something bequeathed to us by the cave-men like those in *The Story of Ab* you know—an instinct that makes you want to prove yourself master; and that the pity is a sign we’re all growing better instead of worse. Don’t you think that’s a fairly good explanation? Of course it is needless to say that Virginia thought it out!

“‘Hannah’s calling me to supper, and I must hurry. Mr. Hunter and the boys had just reached home from Willow Creek as we rode down the lane. I wish you could have seen Jack and Car-

ver when they saw the bear. They were wild, and hailed us as though we were Augustus entering Rome! Best of all, Mr. Hunter says he is going to send the skin to you, Dad—it's all black and curly—for the library floor. Isn't it splendid of him?

“ ‘I simply must run and wash, and rustle a clean middy somewhere.

“ ‘Loads of love,

“ ‘PRISCILLA.

“ ‘P. S.—Mother, dear, I guess I'll have to have still another Thought Book. I never in my life had so many thoughts. They come crowding in—one on top of the other—but many of them are the kind you can't very well express.

“ ‘P. A. W.

“ ‘P. P. S.—I can shoot a bottle all to pieces at thirty yards. Don't you call that pretty good?

“ ‘P. A. W.' ”

“Rustle?” soliloquized Mrs. Winthrop, as Priscilla's father folded the letter. “I've never heard

that word before in such a connection, and she's used it twice!"

"Well," announced Alden Winthrop decidedly, "I've never had much use for Thought Books, but I believe I could write down a thought or two myself if I'd trapped a Rocky Mountain bear!"

CHAPTER V

JEAN MACDONALD—HOMESTEADER

SOUTH of Elk Creek Valley the foot-hills were less ambitious than those east and north. It was easy to climb their sloping, well-trailed sides on horseback or even afoot, and the view across the wide mesa, blue with sagebrush to the distant mountains blue with August haze, was quite reward enough.

Here was real Western country, almost unhampered by civilization, almost unbroken by that certain sign of progress, the barbed-wire fence. This was in miniature what the pioneers must have gazed upon with weary, dream-filled eyes. Virginia and Donald, who often climbed the hills together for a wild gallop through the unfenced sagebrush, liked always to imagine how those sturdy folk of half a century ago urged their tired oxen up other slopes than these; how they halted on the brow of the foot-

hills to rest the patient animals and to fan their hot, dusty faces with their broad-brimmed hats; and how their eager eyes, sweeping over miles of ragged prairie land to the mountains, awful with mystery, saw this great country cleared of sagebrush, intersected with ditches, reclad with homes.

Such had been the history of most of the land above and beyond Elk Creek Valley, and Donald and Virginia were loath to see this one unbroken mesa go. They wanted it as a hunting-ground for prairie chickens and pheasant in the fall, and as a wide, free, unhindered race-course for Pedro and MacDuff. Pedro and MacDuff wanted it, too. They liked to gallop, neck and neck, joyous in the sense of freedom, and in the knowledge that they were giving happiness to their respective riders. For years Donald and Virginia had loved the mesa. They loved it in the spring when the bare patches among the sagebrush grew green and gave birth to hardy spring flowers—buttercups and shooting-stars and spring beauties; they loved it in the long blue days of August and in the shorter golden ones of October; and sometimes they thought they loved it best of all

in winter when it lay, silent and very, very wise, beneath the snow.

But it was to be just theirs no longer. The slow, steady tide of oncoming progress had refused to let it alone. In the spring while Virginia was still at St. Helen's, Donald, home for the Easter recess, had written her of two homesteaders' cabins on the mesa toward the southeast, of fences being built, and of sagebrush rooted up and burned.

It was even less theirs on this August morning, for the cabin of another homesteader had risen as though by magic in the southwest corner; ten acres of freshly-plowed land were being warmed by the sun and made ready for September wheat; and rods of stout barbed-wire tacked to strong, well-made fence-poles were guarding the future wheat against all intruders. The cabin, superior in plan and workmanship to that of the average homesteader, faced the west. It was built of new spruce logs, with well-filled chinks, and boasted two large windows and a porch, in addition to its necessary door. Moreover, an outside stone chimney betokened a fire-place—an untold luxury to a homesteader. A second wire

fence, set at some three rods from the cabin, inclosed it on all sides, and protected a small vegetable garden and a few fruit trees, which the owner had already planted.

It was a good quarter section upon which this ambitious homesteader had filed. On the south the mesa mounted into the higher hills, and this claim included timber; the land already plowed showed the soil to be black and fertile; and a creek, tumbling from the mountains and hurrying by just back of the cabin, promised plenty of water, even in a thirsty season. With a substantial new cabin, three cows and a horse, some hens and two collie dogs, a crop nearly in, fruit trees thriving and a garden growing like wild-fire—what more could one desire? Then add to riches already possessed, the surety of a barn and corral in September, and the probability of twelve pure-bred Shropshire sheep, and what homesteader would not sing for joy?

That was precisely what Jean MacDonald was doing this sunny August morning; for it was a girl—a strong, robust girl of twenty-one—who had taken up the southwestern claim on Virginia's and

Donald's mesa. She was bustling about her little cabin, setting things to rights, and singing for joy. Her voice, clear, strong, and sweet, rang out in one good old Scotch song after another—"Robin Adair," "Loch Lomond," and "Up with the Bonnets of Bonnie Dundee." Sometimes she paused in her sweeping and dusting and hurried to the porch to look away across the mesa toward the north, and to speak to Robert Bruce, her horse, who, saddled and bridled, awaited her coming outside the gate.

"Not yet, Bobby," she called, "not yet! There's no sign of them at all, so be patient!"

Robert Bruce was quite willing to be patient. There was nourishment in plenty between the sagebrush clumps, and he wandered at will, his dragging reins giving sure proof that he would not stray too far.

Meanwhile, his mistress continued her singing and her work. She proudly dusted her new furniture in the room which served as chamber and parlor, rearranged her few books in their wall bookcase, swept up the ashes of her last evening's fire, and brought wood to lay another. Then she turned her attention

to the room which was kitchen and dining-room in one. From a neat chest of drawers she drew her best and only white table-cloth and spread it on the table. The table was a little rickety in one leg, but several folds of newspaper acted as a splendid prop, and quite removed the difficulty. Her supply of china and silver was scarce, but it would do with washing between courses. Four chairs were all she had, but they were quite enough as her guests numbered four. An empty soap-box concealed beneath the table-cloth, and drawn out only when necessary, would do for her.

In fifteen minutes everything was in readiness, even to five early nasturtiums in a tumbler on the dining-table. They had made a special effort to open that morning, and the homesteader was grateful. She paused on her way to the creek-refrigerator to look in the sitting-room mirror. These guests were her very first, and she wanted to appear at her best. Yes, her khaki blouse and skirt were clean and her hair fairly tidy. Her new red tie, she told herself, was quite decidedly jaunty. She blessed that tie, for had it not been for Donald Keith's

kindness in bringing the package to her from the town post-office four days ago, she would neither have known about the girls, nor have had the opportunity of inviting them to come to see her. Of course, they were from the East—all except Virginia Hunter, of whom she had heard so much, and she was a Wyoming homesteader; but, she told herself, that need make no difference. In fact, it made everything much more interesting, for she could learn many things from them, and perhaps—perhaps, they might learn a little bit from her.

Still singing, she hurried to the end of the porch, and looked toward the north. Four specks were distinctly visible on the edge of the mesa. Even as she looked they became larger. They were horses coming toward her cabin, and they bore her guests. She whistled loudly to Robert Bruce, who obediently ceased his browsing and came toward her. A quick run to the creek-refrigerator to see that her butter and cream were safe in the clear, cold water, and then back to Robert; a leap into the saddle and she was off to meet her guests.

Introductions are stilted, unlovely things between

horseback riders on a sagebrush-covered mesa under a blue August sky. There were none this morning. Jean MacDonald reined in the restive Robert Bruce as she drew near her guests, and unceremoniously greeted them all.

"I know every one of you," she said brightly, her dark blue eyes searching their faces—"Mary Williams and Priscilla Winthrop and Vivian Winters—all of you. And I've known you even longer, Virginia. Donald Keith told me all about you a month ago when they helped break my land. I'm so glad you're coming to spend the day with me. You're the very first guests I've ever had on my homestead!"

They were glad, too, they told her, liking her at once, and feeling perfectly at ease. She rode beside Virginia, talking of Donald, the other Keiths who had been so good to her, and her neighbors in the southeast corner of the mesa. Virginia, too, talked freely, asking questions, telling of their recent bear hunt, joining in Jean's admiration of the Keiths. To the three New Englanders, who rode a little behind them, this new comradeship, though a little

startling to their inherent conservatism, was interesting in the extreme. It seemed to be born of a land too big for ceremonies, too frank and open for formalities; and soon they found themselves urging their horses up to Pedro and Robert Bruce, so that they too might enter the widening circle of fellowship.

All four Vigilantes found themselves studying the face of this girl who so often turned toward one and another with a question or a reply. It was a face too tanned and too large-featured to be beautiful or even pretty; but the lines about the nose and mouth were firm and strong, the eyes were wide-open and fearless, and the head was set most independently upon a pair of broad, straight shoulders. There was something about the girl like the mesa—fearless, big, wholesome. It showed itself in the way she managed her horse, in her hearty manner of laughing with her head thrown back, and in the calm, sure, straightforward expression of her dark blue eyes.

"She'd make the finest kind of a friend, I'm sure of that," said Mary to herself, and then to Priscilla

and Vivian, as they dropped behind for a moment just before reaching the little cabin.

"Yes," agreed Priscilla, "she surely would. I wonder what there is about her that makes a person feel small. I've been feeling positively microscopic ever since she rode up to us."

"I'm glad you have," sighed Vivian, thankful that another shared her sensation. "So have I. I feel about as big as a field-mouse, and I think I know why. You just know a girl like her would never fall off a horse, or run away from a gun, or—do anything babyish like that. And just imagine daring to live all alone in a little cabin like this! I'd die! I know I should!"

But the small feeling was forgotten in the good time which followed. Robert Bruce, unspeakably glad of company, escorted his four guests to choice bits of grass in among the sagebrush; the two collies barked in welcome; and the girls, loaded with saddles and bridles, went in through the gate toward the cabin. Jean MacDonald, proud and happy, led the way into the house and the interested Vigilantes followed. They had never supposed a log house could

be so attractive within; but the neat dark furniture, the couch with its brown cover, the stone fire-place, and the books and pictures made the little cabin one of the most homelike places they had ever seen. A mountain sheep looked down upon them from above the fire-place. Jean had shot him the winter before in Montana, she told them. In the corner by the cot stood her guns—one large, double-barreled Winchester, a shot-gun, and a small rifle. Above them on the logs rested her fishing-rods.

It was all so new and interesting to three pair of fascinated eyes. They asked question after question and explored every nook and corner of the cabin and its surroundings—the kitchen with its shining stove, singing tea-kettle, and white-covered table, the pantry, the root-cellar and chicken-house, and last of all the creek-refrigerator.

“It’s all right in the daytime,” announced Vivian, as they sat on the porch before beginning to get dinner, “but I don’t see how you stand it all alone at night.” She paused. “I’d die!” she finished simply.

Jean MacDonald did not laugh, though she felt

like it at first, for she saw that Vivian was very much in earnest.

"I think I know how you feel, Vivian," she said kindly. "I know you would be very lonely, because, you see, you've always lived in a city or at school where there have been folks all about you. But, you see, it's different with me. I was born on a homestead in Montana, and I'm used to endless tracts of land without neighbors. I guess I've made better friends with the mountains than you've been able to yet, and with the silence which I know some people fear. You see, I've never been afraid in all my life, so I don't mind the loneliness."

Vivian was staring at her, incredulous.

"Never—been—afraid—of—anything?" she repeated questioningly. "Honestly, haven't you—all your life?"

Jean MacDonald considered for a moment.

"No," she said, "honestly, I don't believe I ever have. I was brought up never to fear the dark or the silence or being alone or—anything like that. Those are the most awful things, I guess, to persons who are afraid. And as for wild animals or people

who would do harm (and there aren't many of those in the world) why, you see"—she raised her head and her eyes flashed—"you see, I can take care of myself! I'm thankful," she added, "that I'm not afraid of things. I think fear must be a terrible thing!"

Vivian's blue eyes filled with sudden tears.

"It is," she said. "It's the most dreadful monster in the whole wide world!"

Jean MacDonald placed a firm, brown hand on Vivian's shoulder as they all went in together to prepare dinner, and Vivian felt comradeship and understanding in that friendly hand. Perhaps, some day, she said to herself, she would be brave also; even before she went East, she might become a more worthy Vigilante. At all events she would begin once more. Perhaps, after all, she concluded, as she ran to the creek-refrigerator after the butter and cream—perhaps after all, life was just a series of beginnings—again—each one a wee bit farther on!

Dinner was the jolliest meal imaginable. They ate and laughed—laughed and ate. Everything was delicious—the trout caught in the creek and fried to

a rich brown, the baked potatoes, the fresh biscuits, the lettuce and radishes from the garden, and the custard pudding. Jean MacDonald with all her other accomplishments was a famous cook. That was self-evident.

After dinner they went out upon the porch, gazed across the mesa bluer than ever in the afternoon haze, and talked. Jean longed to know about school, and they told her of St. Helen's, of Miss King, and Miss Wallace, of the dear funny Blackmores, and of poor tactless Miss Green. Tears ran down Jean's face as Virginia told of Katrina Van Rensaelar and the deluge she never received, and of how Priscilla had given the German measles to the boys at the Gordon School.

Then Mary begged to know something about homesteading, and Jean told of how she had come to Wyoming. Her far-off neighbors in the other corner of the mesa had been friends in Montana, she said, and it was they who had encouraged her to come and take up an opposite claim. She explained how the land would become her own after she had lived upon it seven months each year for

three years; how each year she must plow and fence so many acres; and how at the end of that time she could sell the land at a good price, or else stay and improve it further.

“And which will you do?” asked the interested Mary while the others listened. “Will you stay or go away after it is yours?”

She would go away for a while, she told them, and rent her land. Her neighbors yonder would be glad to hire it. She was going to college. Her eyes glowed with enthusiasm as she dreamed her dream for them. Since her graduation from High School she had taught in country schools until she had saved money enough to pay for her improvements on the homestead. Everything was paid for—the cabin (she had made most of the furniture herself), the fencing, the plowing, her stock—everything; and there was money enough left for fall planting, a new barn, and some sheep, and the autumn expenses. In December, perhaps, she would leave and earn some more money until it was time to come back again. Then in another August she would have a crop from her winter wheat, and an-

other in September from the spring planting. She could hardly wait for the time to come when she should really have money from a crop of her own raising.

After the three years were over, and the land was hers, if she could afford it, she was going to college. If she did not have the money then, why she would work until she did. She would study agriculture at college, learn the best methods of improving the land, and then come back to carry them out. She would build a new house in place of the cabin, buy some more land, and make her ranch one of the best in all Wyoming!

The Vigilantes were in a new world as they listened—a world where the only capital necessary was ambition, enthusiasm, vigor! Something told them that this homesteading girl was richer in many things than they themselves; that the treasures of hard work were quite as precious as those of wealth; and that Jean MacDonald was finding for herself through her own untiring labor the things most worth-while.

They were silent an hour later as they left their

new friend on the edge of the mesa, and rode down the hills toward Elk Creek Valley.

"I think it's been about the happiest day I've ever had in my life," she told them, as she shook hands all around and said good-by. "I've loads of things to think about and laugh about—until you come again. Give Siwash a looser rein, Vivian. He won't stumble. Good-by!"

They looked back as they reached the Valley level to see Jean MacDonald and Robert Bruce silhouetted against the sky-line, and to wave them a last good-by.

"It's like your 'Power of the West' picture in our room at school, Virginia," Priscilla almost whispered—"the man on horseback with the sunset and the mountains behind him. Just look! There! Now she's turned Robert, and now they're out of sight!"

That night they all sat on the porch together and watched the sunset. A flaming pageant of color traced and retraced its course across the sky.

"I never saw such color," cried Aunt Nan. "Sometimes you think it's saffron, and then you

know it's amber, and then you're sure it's real gold, and—it's changed again! See, Virginia!"

"I think I know what it's like," said Virginia. "Mother and I discovered it years ago when I was a little girl. Jim took us camping once when Father was away, and at night we had a big fire and sat and watched it. The sunset was gorgeous like this, I remember, and just as we were watching it and the fire, Mother discovered what the clouds were like. They're like the smoke as the flames underneath push it through the green boughs! It's just that wonderful color in the sky now. The next time we camp you'll see, Aunt Nan. It always makes me think of the flame-colored veils which the Roman girls used to wear on their wedding-days. Mother told me about them that very night."

"Just think how beautiful it must be from Jean's cabin," said Priscilla. "And she can see a larger sweep of sky and mountains because she's up higher than we. I know she's watching it all alone, and maybe dreaming about college."

"I'll never forget her to-day," Mary said earnestly. "I think she's wonderful! And, Aunt Nan,

you just know from her eyes that she's gazed on big stretches of country all her life. You must go with us next time to see her."

"It's more than that, Mary." The voice came from the corner of the porch where Vivian sat apart from the others. "It's more than that. You don't just know she's always looked at big things. You know she's had them inside of her all her life long!"

CHAPTER VI

MISS GREEN AGAIN

"I KNOW I shouldn't worry," said Mary to Aunt Nan, "but I just can't help thinking of Anne and the Twins. Of course, as far as Jean and Jess are concerned, they won't mind—they'll think it the greatest adventure imaginable; but Anne will be terrified, and so will Mrs. Hill. I'm so glad Mother and I went last summer."

"What does the paper say?" asked Aunt Nan.

They were sitting on the porch awaiting the arrival of Priscilla, Virginia, and Vivian, who had walked to the road for the mail. Dick, coming on horseback, had brought the heavier papers and packages, and Mary was absorbed in the latest reports of the newly declared war.

"Oh, it's mostly about mobilizing and the German advance, but there are scores of incidents about Americans unable to get money or return passages,

or anything; and here is something about their being made to walk across the border into Switzerland. Dear me! I wonder just where Anne is! In Germany somewhere, I know."

"Don't worry, dear," reassured Aunt Nan. "There may be disagreeable things, but I'm sure our people won't be in any real trouble or danger. Where are those girls anyway? They must have sat down to read their own letters, and forgotten all about us."

"Here they come," said Mary, looking down the cottonwood-bordered lane. "They're reading something all together, and laughing. Maybe it's a letter from the Twins or Anne."

It proved to be a veritable volume from the Blackmore twins, Jean being the real author, but Jess having lent her personality without stint to the incident related.

"It's a perfect scream," cried Priscilla, half-choked with laughter as she came up the steps. "Mary, what do you think? They've seen—no, I won't tell, Virginia, but read it quick!"

"When is it dated?" asked Mary.

"July 20th," Virginia told her. "The very day you people came. You see, 'twas too early then for any trouble. Would you rather wait to hear it, Aunt Nan, until you've read your mail?"

Aunt Nan's mail was unimportant, she said, compared to a letter from the interesting Blackmore twins.

"It's a regular book," announced Virginia, as she settled herself against a post, and turned the pages. "Jean probably didn't do much sight-seeing on the afternoon she wrote this.

" 'SAFE AT LAST IN BERLIN, GERMANY,

" 'July 20, 19—.

" 'DEAR VIRGINIA AND EVERYBODY ELSE:

" 'It is only through Anne's economy and Jess' impudence and my genius at conducting a party that we are here and writing to you. Had each of us lacked the quality named above, we should to-day doubtless be languishing within the walls of a German poor-house. But instead we are in a lovely pension—all together and unspeakably happy.

“The story in itself is so thrilling that I hate to give you the *necessary setting*, as Miss Wallace would say, but I must. The first step is to explain how we all happen to be together. It was this way: Father and Jess and I *did* stay in England for a week after all. You see, Jess had faithfully promised every girl in English History that she would see Lady Jane Grey’s name where she had cut it herself in the Tower; and I had given my oath to record the impressions made upon me by the sight of Kenilworth by moonlight. Whether Dad would have considered those vows worthy or not, we do not know, had it not been that he wanted to go to the Bodleian Library at Oxford to see some musty old manuscript or other. So on our way from Liverpool to Oxford we stopped at Kenilworth, and I *did* see it at moonlight. I shall give my impressions at a later date. The search for another old manuscript gave Jess her chance at the Tower and “JANE,” and it was there in the little chapel that we met Anne and Mrs. Hill.

“They had planned the most wonderful week

down in Surrey in a tiny English village called Shere, which Anne said was, according to the guide-books, "the perfect realization of an artist's dream." She begged us to go along with them, and poor Mrs. Hill, I suppose, felt obliged to invite us also, though what she may have said to Anne in private I do not yet know. We became imbued with desire to see the artist's dream realized and to be with Anne, so with Jess to hurry Mrs. Hill and me to drag Anne, we tore through Billingsgate fish-market and up King William Street to the Bank, where we were to meet Father.

"'After the poor man had recovered from his astonishment, he gave his consent—namely, that we should go to Surrey with Anne and Mrs. Hill (*if they really wanted us*) then across the channel to Rotterdam, up the Rhine and on to Berlin, where he would meet us. Mrs. Hill really seemed glad to have us go with them and, to be very frank, I think the Rev. Dr. Blackmore was glad to get rid of us. You see, Jess and I simply can't get enthusiastic over the Middle Ages and old manuscripts, and I think it worries Dad.

“ ‘Well, our learned father went on to Berlin, and his imbecile offspring to Surrey. Shere was lovely! *My dream was realized at least.* I’ll never forget the little gardens filled with roses and Canterbury bells, and the grain-fields dotted with poppies, and the woods filled with holly and tall pink foxgloves, and the beeches all silvery and green. We rode bicycles all over Surrey, and ate roast beef and Yorkshire pudding and drank ginger beer at quaint little English inns. You’ll hear all about it next year in English class, for I’ve themes enough for everybody—at least material for them.

“ ‘Then we went back to London, and had all sorts of adventures there, from our cab-horse falling flat in Piccadilly Circus to Jess being arrested at the House of Commons gate; but if Mrs. Hill ever repented of her invitation she didn’t let us know, and we were never happier in our lives.

“ ‘We started for Rotterdam the 14th of July, crossed the Channel with flying colors since we went to bed immediately upon going aboard, and started up the Rhine the next day on a boat ap-

appropriately named the *Siegfried*. The first day we went through flat Holland country, but on the next we had reached the hills, all walled-up and covered with vineyards. That evening we arrived at Cologne, where we were to stay a day to see the Cathedral, and went to our hotel. And here the great adventure begins!

“ ‘No sooner had we arrived at the hotel and asked for mail, than the clerk handed Mrs. Hill a telegram. It was from her music-teacher in Berlin, and asked her to be in Berlin the next day without fail for a lesson. What was she to do? She said she just couldn’t miss the lesson, and yet she just couldn’t bear to take us girls before we had seen the Cathedral or the castles on the Rhine.

“ ‘It didn’t take Jess and Anne and me long to decide. She must go on, of course, we told her, and we would see the Cathedral, go up the rest of the Rhine quite by ourselves, and on by train from Mayence to Berlin. We could see she was hesitating, probably feeling that Anne might be trusted, but not being exactly sure of those Blackmore twins.

“ ‘The language?’ she said. ‘Your German? You may not find English spoken everywhere, you know.’ ”

“ ‘Anne hastened to remark that I had studied German for three years, and carried off honors. Her imagination gave birth to the honors, whereupon I, wishing above all else to play my part, cleared my throat, thought a moment, and requested the clerk to bring me a glass of water, which he did with a grin.

“ ‘Whether my visible success reassured Mrs. Hill or not, I do not know, but anyhow she departed that night for Berlin, leaving us loaded with endless instructions, extra money, and a tiny red German dictionary. I never felt so officious in my life as when I called a cab and ushered Jess and Anne into it after the train had pulled out. I can see now why it is that Thomas Cook and Son have been so eminently successful.

“ ‘The next day we spent browsing around in the Cathedral. To describe it would be out of place in this letter, which deals primarily with adventure. I might say, however, that Jess bought

all of you silver pendants of the Three Wise Men of Cologne, when she ought to have saved her money. That evening we took the Rhine-boat—the *Parsifal* this time—and when we awoke in the morning we were well among the castles. It was a marvelous day, and I'll have loads to tell you about it in the fall.

“We reached Mayence in the evening in a pouring rain, and took a cab, driven by a funny, red-faced driver, to a hotel where English was spoken, for however Mrs. Hill may have been impressed by my honors in German she had taken care to recommend English hotels. Our train for Berlin was to leave at nine A. M., so we went to bed early, feeling too self-resourceful for words.

“Do you remember how, with cheers for St. Helen's and groans for Athens, we bequeathed Greenie to the Ancient World last winter? Who at that joyous moment would have thought that she would again and so soon enter our lives? Imagine then, if you can, the chill of horror which shook us all when upon alighting at the Mayence station the next morning, ready to take our train

for Berlin, we beheld—*unmistakably beheld*—our beloved Greenie by the drinking-fountain!!! Her back was toward us, and all the proofs we had at that moment were the hang of her familiar gray suit, and our old friend, that absurd chicken feather, awry upon her little, black, St. Helen's hat. We stood breathless and surveyed her.

“ ‘It is!’ said Jess. ‘Let's run!’ ”

“ ‘It's not!’ said Anne. ‘She's in Athens. Besides, she's too antiseptic to drink at a fountain!’ ”

“ ‘I believe it is,’ said I. ‘It's just as well to look for shelter!’ ”

“ ‘Of course, it is,’ said Jess. ‘That chicken-feather——’ ”

“ ‘And just then she looked up! There was no longer any question as to identity. In spite of drinking-fountains and Athens, it was Greenie! She looked quite the same as ever, except for the absence of the gray shawl, and no visible effects of curl-papers. ”

“ ‘Whether it was Providence, Greenie's near-sightedness or our own speed that saved us, I

don't know ; but I do know we took her bearings and all ran in opposite directions. She was going through the door marked *South*. Anne accordingly ran north, Jess east, and I west.

“ “Meet in five minutes at the fountain,” I commanded hoarsely as we separated.

“ ‘That was the last we saw of Greenie’s visible form. How she happened to be in Mayence we knew not. Jess insisted she never reached Athens at all, but was discovered en route at Mayence, placed in the Museum there, and was simply out on parole for exercise! Be that as it may, the excitement of seeing her, and the flight which followed, proved most disastrous to us all, for when we met five minutes later at the fountain, the Blackmore purse, carried by Jess, was gone!

“ ‘Anne and I stood and glared at my poor twin just as though dropping a purse were a disgrace which could never come to us even when escaping from Miss Green. I informed her of a fact which she has known for eighteen years—namely, that twenty dollars, the amount in the purse,

might be a trifle to some, but was colossal in the eyes of a minister's family. Anne was less scathing, but by no means charitable. Poor Jess, on the verge of tears, suggested that instead of scolding her we'd better look for the purse, which we proceeded to do without success.

"Thereupon Anne counted her money, my honors in German of course being a constant help. A twenty mark piece—five dollars; a ten mark piece—two dollars and a half; and some change amounting to four marks or another dollar. Eight dollars and fifty cents in all, and three persons, who had had no breakfast, must be transported to Berlin!

" "It's impossible!" said Anne.

" "It's got to be done!" said I.

" "If I have to beg on the streets, it *shall* be done!" cried Jess, so loudly that every one in the station looked in our direction.

" "How much are the tickets?" asked Anne. "Mother said to go second-class in Germany."

" "I'll see," said I officiously, and started toward a blue-capped official in a cage.

“ “You’d best hurry,” cried Anne. “The train goes in twenty minutes.”

“I smiled upon the somber man in the cage and asked in my best and clearest English how much the tickets were. A blank stare was his only answer. He understood no English, and to save my life I could think of no German. I stammered and stammered but with no success, and in a few seconds a fat German lady with six children and a dog had unceremoniously pushed me out of the way. I tried another official and another with the same result. A helpless feeling seized me. I looked at the clock. Five minutes out of the twenty gone! I ran back frantically to Jess and Anne, snatched the little red dictionary, and was off again in search of still another official. This time I was understood, bad as was my German, but *I* couldn’t understand, so things were as hopeless as ever.

“Ten minutes before train time I returned desperate to my twin and Anne, and confessed that honors in German were of no assistance whatsoever. We gazed at one another blankly

Money gone—hope gone—what should we do? At that moment Jess darted away. Our first thought was that she had spied Miss Green, and was leaving us to our fate for revenge; but a moment later we saw that she had seized upon a tall man, who had been quietly crossing the platform. Her impudence was appalling! She grabbed the man by the arm without a word of explanation, and literally dragged him toward us. I don't think she had spoken to him at all until she reached Anne and me.

“ ‘ ‘Here,’ she said, pointing a finger of scorn at me, ‘here is my sister who is supposed to know German and doesn't. She'll tell you how you can help us out.’ ”

“ ‘The man, who wore a Thomas Cook and Son hat, was very polite after he had recovered from his surprise. I explained the difficulty we were in as quickly as possible, and he, in turn, said that second-class tickets to Berlin cost in the neighborhood of four dollars, that the train left in seven minutes, and that if we would give him the money he would gladly make the purchase.

“ “Four dollars!” gasped Anne. “Apiece, you mean, or together?”

“ “Apiece,” said the man.

“ “Then we can’t go,” said Anne. “I knew it all the time.” And she dropped in a limp little heap on the bench near by just as though she never could get up.

“ “Why, what’s the matter?” asked the man. “Out of money?”

“ “Then Jess, who was really to blame, felt called upon to explain.

“ “Yes, sir, we are,” she said, “all but eight dollars and fifty cents. You see, we experienced a severe shock in seeing G—— Miss Green, an old teacher of ours, by the drinking-fountain, when we thought she was in Athens. We didn’t feel as though we could speak to her until—until we had washed and brushed up a little, and so we—well, we ran, and somehow I lost our family purse.”

“ “I see,” said the man.

“ “He seemed very interested all of a sudden, and said we needn’t worry at all if we had eight

dollars and a half. There was another train leaving an hour later, he said—a train which carried third-class carriages. We would be quite safe in traveling that way, and he would personally see us on board, if we wished. At that Anne and her spirits arose.

“ “Miss Green,” he repeated. “You say she was your teacher?”

“ “Yes,” said I wonderingly. “She most certainly was.”

“ “Harriet, her given name?” asked the man.

“ “Yes!” cried Jess and Anne and I all together. “You don’t know her, do you?”

“ “An angular person in a gray suit?” he continued. “Wears spectacles and——”

“ “Crimps,” interrupted Jess. “Yes, she’s the one, though she hasn’t any this morning. You see, at school she always was a little—well, formidable, and we——”

“ “I see,” said the man again. “Well, since I know she’s around here, I may as well wait. I told her to be at our office just outside the station at ten o’clock, and it’s nearly that now. You

see," he explained, "she's been in Athens for six months, and she's very anxious to conduct a small party back there—lecture on the ancient civilization and all that sort of thing, you know. Perhaps, since she was your teacher, you'll be able to tell me how she'd do. She hasn't had time to get recommendations for just this sort of work, you see."

" "How—how long would she be gone?" ventured Jess.

" "Well," explained the Thomas Cook man, "if she did well, we'd probably keep her on the force. We're always looking for folks like that—to take parties—especially to Athens or Egypt. They're rare! This might be a life job."

" "I'd be willing to recommend her!" said Jess, a little too promptly, I thought.

" "I think," said Anne, "it depends a good deal on the party she's going to take."

" "It certainly does," I agreed.

" "Well," said the man again, "it's an easy party. There's a professor who's nearly eighty, and who's wanted all his life to go to Athens;

and a minister who's trying to discover the exact spot where Paul preached to the Athenians; and a couple of teachers who are something like Miss Green, I think—about that type, you know. They're terribly interested in the temples on the Acropolis."

" "Miss Green then is certainly the woman for you, sir," I announced, feeling like an Employment Bureau. "She's steeped in the Ancient World! She dotes on Rameses and the Pharaohs and the Tarquins and Solon; and she knows more about every one of them than she knows about—*us*, for instance."

" "I see," said the man.

" "The only reason we hesitated for a moment," added Anne, "was because we thought the party might be composed of young people, and, you see, Miss Green has never specialized to any great extent in—in—*young life!*"

" "I understand perfectly," said our benefactor. "I guess I'll run along, young ladies. She might be in my office. Get your tickets from the man in the red cap at the largest window

over there. He speaks English. Your train will reach Berlin at seven. It's on track four. Don't thank me at all. I'm indebted to you. Won't you walk to the office and see Miss Green? She'd be delighted, I'm sure!"

" 'Anne answered for us. "No, thank you," she said. "I'm afraid we can't. We haven't had breakfast yet, and we must telegraph my mother. She'll expect us earlier. Yes, thank you, I'm sure we can manage quite well alone. Give Miss Green our best regards. I'm sure we hope she'll be successful."

" 'He shook hands all around.

" " "You really think," asked Jess, a little worried in tone, I thought, "you really think it's likely to be a job for life?"

" " "Yes," said the man, "I do. I think she's the very woman I've been looking for."

" 'Then he went. We stood looking at one another, not knowing what to say. It had all been too unexpected.

" " "Well," said Jess at last, "I don't know but that a job for life is cheap at twenty dollars. And,

you know, she really expected to return to St. Helen's year after next."

"We had just time to eat our belated breakfast, telegraph, buy our tickets, and catch the ten o'clock train, which carried us to Berlin without incident, other than embarrassments arising from my total lack of German. We didn't mind third class at all. It's a lot more human. Mrs. Hill and Dad met us, and Dad forgot all about the twenty dollars when we told him about Greenie.

"I've given up seeing the Emperor's stables to tell you all of this, and I hope you appreciate it. Jess and Anne send loads of love to all of you, and so do I. I can't believe Wyoming is any better than Germany!

" 'JEAN.' "

"I can't help wondering, Virginia," said Priscilla, after they had all laughed again over Jean's letter, "I can't help wondering whether Greenie will consider *this* vocation thrust upon her!"

"That's just what I was wondering, too," returned Virginia.

CHAPTER VII

THE VIGILANTES HOMESTEAD

"JOHN, do you really think it's safe?"

It was Aunt Nan who asked the question. Mr. Hunter laughed.

"Safe, Nan? They couldn't be safer. There's nothing in the wide world to hurt them out there on the mesa. They're safer there, in my opinion, than any place I know, and if they want to know what homesteading is like, why let them homestead for a night! It won't hurt them a bit. If they go back to school with a few of Jean MacDonald's ideas, they'll be very fortunate."

"It seems as though I ought to go," said Aunt Nan, "and still I don't know that my being there would do any good."

"Not a bit," returned Virginia's father. "Roughing it at seventeen and thirty are two entirely different experiences. Stay at home and be civilized,

but let them go and don't worry for a moment. They'll show up to-morrow safe and sound with another bran-new experience for their Thought Books. See if they don't!"

So it happened that Aunt Nan was convinced and gave her consent to Virginia's just-born and dearly-beloved plan—namely, that the four Vigilantes should homestead for Jean MacDonald during her absence of one night from her cabin on the mesa. Jean had ridden over that morning on her way to town to spend the night with a friend, and Virginia's plan had sprung full-born like Athena from the head of Zeus.

"Don't you want us to homestead for you, Jean, while you're away?" she had asked.

Jean had gladly accepted the offer. "It would be just the thing," she said. Then they could really see why she loved the mesa as she did, and especially her very own corner of it. The dogs would be glad of company, for she had driven the three cows that very morning to the neighboring homestead, and except for the chickens, Watch and King were all alone. The cabin door had no lock, and

they might go right in and make themselves at home. There was an extra cot in the kitchen, bedding in plenty, and loads of food supplies. She would simply love to have them do it!

Virginia had turned questioningly to the listening Vigilantes.

"Let's!" said Mary.

"Oh, do let's!" cried Priscilla.

"Of course," faltered Vivian, insuperably buoyed up by company.

"All right," said Jean MacDonald as she turned Robert Bruce toward the road. "It's settled then! There's plenty of butter and milk in the creek-refrigerator—I left them there—and lots of fish in the creek. You'll have to rustle your own wood, I guess. Help yourselves to everything! Good-by!"

William, who was working among his flowers, had waited only for Aunt Nan's approval. Now that it had come, he was off to saddle the horses, while the excited Vigilantes flew to get into their riding-clothes.

"I'm so glad you dared to suggest it, Virginia,"

said Priscilla, struggling with her boot lacings. "I thought of it, too—that's what I meant by nudging you—but, of course, I wouldn't have liked to propose it. In the two weeks I've been here, I've had the best time I ever had in my life, and I really believe this is going to be the best of all."

"I suppose," observed Virginia, "that the boys will be more or less disappointed because we won't be here to go on the gopher hunt, but we can shoot dozens of gophers any day."

"Of course," returned Vivian, who had never shot one in her life.

"Of course," echoed Mary, who was in the same class with Vivian.

"Besides," continued Priscilla, "the experience of shooting a gopher, while doubtless thrilling in the extreme, doesn't compare for one moment with homesteading. Do you know, girls, I believe I'll take along my Thought Book. Something might come to me!"

"I would, if I were you," acquiesced Virginia. "No, Hannah, dear," she added, turning to the faithful retainer in the doorway, "we don't want a thing

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to eat. Thank you just as much. It wouldn't be homesteading at all if we carried food. Jean says there are plenty of supplies out there. We're just going to take our night-dresses and combs and tooth-brushes and Priscilla's Thought Book."

Hannah smiled dubiously.

"Supplies is all right, deary," said she, "but who's going to cook them?"

"I can make biscuits, I think," offered Mary. "At least, I did once."

Virginia thought for a moment, uncertain of her contribution.

"I'm sure I can fry fish," she said. "I've seen you do it a hundred times, Hannah."

Priscilla and Vivian, not being culinary experts, made no promises; but Virginia, even in the face of discouragement, still insisted that they take nothing.

"Then don't go till after dinner," called Aunt Nan from her room. "It will be ready in an hour."

"Better wait," reiterated Mr. Hunter. "William's had to go on the range a piece for the horses, anyway."

So it was after dinner that the four homesteaders started for their borrowed claim, leaving behind three disgusted boys armed for a gopher hunt, an amused father, an interested William, a still doubtful Aunt Nan, and a much-worried Hannah.

"Can't we even come to call?" asked Carver, holding Vivian's horse for her to mount.

"No, Carver," said Virginia sweetly, "you can't. We want to see how it will really seem to be homesteading all alone. We'll be back by noon tomorrow, and will go after gophers in the afternoon, if you want to wait. If you don't, it's all right."

"Why not invite us to supper?" suggested Donald. "We'll go directly afterward, and won't come too early."

"I should say not," cried Priscilla, much to Hannah's amusement as they galloped away. "Supper is to be an experiment for us, and we don't want any guests."

They rode south through the hills to Elk Creek Valley, where the pink and blue of the blossoms were fading a little in the August sun. It would

be a golden Valley soon, Virginia said—yellow with sun-flowers and golden-rod. Then they climbed the foot-hills to the mesa, and rode eagerly toward their newly-acquired cabin in the southwest corner.

"I feel exactly like the owner," confided Virginia, urging Pedro forward toward their goal. "I'm wondering if anything has happened since my trip to town."

Apparently nothing had happened. The cabin was slumbering peacefully in the August sunshine. Watch and King, however, were wide awake. They came bounding around the corner of the house, ready to guard their mistress' property from all intruders. But in their superior dog wisdom they soon remembered that these young ladies were the friends who a few days before had made their mistress happy, and they gave the Vigilantes a royal welcome—both for Jean and for themselves.

Virginia considered matters for a moment before dismounting.

"I think I'll leave Pedro's bridle on," she said. "Then he won't stray far, and the others will keep

near him. We'll unsaddle and put the things on the porch. Then that will be done. It's three o'clock now," she continued, consulting her watch, "and I don't think it would be a bad plan to get settled and consider supper, do you?"

No, they did not, they told her, as they dismounted. Virginia, with Pedro unsaddled and eager to feed, proudly watched Vivian as she tugged at Siwash's saddle-straps, and took off his bridle. It was some time since Vivian had asked assistance. Her heart might be beating fearfully inside—it probably was—when Siwash shook his head impatiently and stamped a foot; but only an instinctive backward movement proved that the fear was still there.

"Vivian's making new roots every day," Virginia said to herself, "and deep ones, too." And she smiled encouragingly into Vivian's blue eyes, as, the horses freed, they carried the saddles, blankets, and bridles to the porch.

Jean MacDonald was right. The cabin door would not lock. Three Vigilantes looked somewhat askance at one another when this fact was made

known, though the fourth seemed not to consider it at all. The cot in the kitchen was examined and pronounced comfortable.

"At least as comfortable as one would wish, homesteading for one night," said Priscilla.

Lots were drawn for beds and companions. Vivian and Virginia, it was thus decided, should sleep in the living-room, and Priscilla and Mary in the kitchen.

"Of course, we could move the kitchen cot into the living-room," said Virginia, "but it really isn't worth the trouble where the door is so small. Besides, you girls don't feel the least bit frightened about sleeping out there, anyway."

Mary looked at Priscilla and Priscilla looked at Mary. Not for veritable worlds would they have confided to Virginia the joy which would fill their hearts if that refractory kitchen cot could be moved into the living-room; not for untold riches would they have confessed the sinking feeling which attacked them upon the thought of sleeping in the kitchen nearest that unlocked door. A bear might push open that door, or a mountain lion roar out-

side their window—they would be game to the end!

“Now,” announced Virginia, quite unconscious of the sensations which were agitating her friends, “I think we’d best begin to get supper. It may take some time. Mary, I see there’s a cook book in the kitchen. If you’ve made biscuits only once, it might be well for you to study up a little. Vivian can set the table, and get some lettuce from the garden. I’ll rustle the wood for the fire, and get the potatoes ready. Hannah told me to bake them about an hour. Priscilla, why don’t you take one of Jean’s rods and follow up the creek? There are some quaking-asps in a shady place up a little way, and it wouldn’t surprise me at all if you got a trout there. Use some of those little dark flies—they’re good this kind of a day. Come to think of it, Jean has some already on. You might add a grasshopper or two. There’ll be plenty of them hopping around. Pinch their noses and they’ll keep still.”

Priscilla, armed with Virginia’s directions, and a total lack of experience, took the rod and went her way. Never in her life had she caught a fish,

but the zest of a possible catch seized her. If she could only get one, it would be something more to tell Alden, and might elicit praise as high as the bear-trapping experience had done. She saw the quaking-asps some rods above the cabin, crawled under the wire fence, and went toward them. Something hopped out of her way. A grasshopper! She jumped, but missed him! Personally she did not care for the *feel* of grasshoppers, and their kindred of crawly things, but if she would accomplish her purpose, she must procure one. She dropped on her knees, and began her search. There were grasshoppers in plenty, but they were of a very swift variety. Priscilla darted and dove on this side and that before she finally caught her prey. With loathing and disgust she proceeded to pinch his nose and render him helpless. She placed him awkwardly and none too securely on the hook beneath the little black fly, strode to the quaking-asps, disentangled her rod and line a dozen times, and at length managed to drop the baited hook into the creek. Then she straightened her weary form, grasped her rod firmly in her right hand and waited.

The question was—should she do anything more than wait? Were one's chances of success greater if she wiggled the rod? Should one just stand still or walk back and forth, dragging the line after her?

If the trout in the dark pool under the shadow of the quaking-asps had seen the performance that preceded the appearance of that fly and grasshopper, he never would have deigned to approach them. But his late afternoon nap had fortunately prevented, and now supper was before his very eyes. He darted for the grasshopper and securely seized it. Priscilla, standing motionless upon the bank, felt a tremor go through the rod in her hand, saw the tip bend, felt a frightful tug as the fish darted downstream. Something told her that her dream was realized—that she had at least *hooked* a fish!

Had the fish in question been less greedy, he would have assuredly made his escape. Priscilla knew nothing of the rules of angling. She only knew that she should never recover from chagrin and shame if that fish eluded her. She dropped the rod, grasped the line tightly in both hands, slid down

the bank, stood in the creek to her boot-tops, and pulled with all her might. The trout, hindered by surprise as well as greediness, surrendered, and Priscilla with trembling hands and glowing eyes drew him to shore.

It never occurred to her to take him from the hook. Her one thought was to notify the Vigilantes of her success. Holding the line in one hand, just above the flapping, defeated trout, and grasping the rod in the other, she ran with all her might to the cabin, burst in the door, and exhibited her fish and her dripping, triumphant self to the Vigilantes. Fears of unlocked doors had fled! It was still light, and she was a conqueror!

Supper that night, in spite of Hannah's fears, was an unqualified success. Memory and the cookbook had sufficed to make very creditable biscuits, the trout, rather demolished by vigorous cleaning, lay, brown and sizzling, in a nest of fresh lettuce leaves, and the potatoes were perfect.

"Isn't it fun?" cried Virginia, as they ate the last crumb. "It's better even than I thought."

"It's lovely," said Vivian, "only I feel just the

same way that I did about staying all alone as Jean does. Look outside, Virginia. It's getting dark already!"

"Yes," answered Virginia, going to the window, "it does in August, though the twilights stay like this a long time. See, there's a star! Doesn't it twinkle? You can actually see the points! Let's wish on it. I wish—let me see—I wish for the loveliest year at St. Helen's we could possibly have—a year we'll remember all our lives!"

"I wish," said Mary, "that college may be just as lovely, and that I'll make as good new friends as you all are."

"I wish," said Priscilla thoughtfully, "I wish I may be just as good a Senior Monitor as you were, Mary."

"I'm not going to tell my wish," said Vivian softly. "It's—it's too much about me."

Dishes were washed and dogs and chickens fed. Then they came out-of-doors in the ever-deepening stillness to watch the moon rise over the blue shadowy mountains, and look down upon the mesa, upon the horses feeding some rods away among the sage-

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brush, and upon them as they stood together a little distance from the cabin.

"Isn't it still?" whispered Vivian, holding Virginia's hand. "You can just hear the silence in your ears. I believe it's louder than the creek!"

"I love it!" said Mary, unlocked doors all forgotten in a blessed, all-together feeling. "See the stars come out one by one. You can almost see them opening the doors of Heaven before they look through. I never saw so many in all my life. And isn't the sky blue? It's never that way at home!"

"I can understand better than ever, Virginia," said Priscilla, "how you used to feel at school when we would open the French doors and go out on the porch. You said it wasn't satisfying someway. I thought I understood on the getting-acquainted trip, but now I know better than ever."

"It makes you feel like whispering, doesn't it?" Vivian whispered again. "It's all so big and we're so little. But it doesn't scare me so much now."

"I've been thinking," said Virginia softly, "of Matthew Arnold's poem—the one on *Self-Dependence*, you know, Vivian, which we had in class, and

which Miss Wallace likes so much. Of course, he was on the sea when he thought of it, but so are we—on a prairie sea—and I'm sure the stars were never brighter, even there. I learned it because I think it expresses the way one feels out here. I used to feel little, too, Vivian, but I don't any more. I feel just as though some strange thing inside of me were trying to reach the stars. It's just as though all the little things that have bothered you were gone away—just as though you were ready to learn *real* things from the stars and the silence and the mountains—learn how to be like them, I mean. You know what he said in the poem, Vivian—the stanza about the stars—the one Miss Wallace loves the best:

‘Unaffrighted by the silence round them,
Undistracted by the sights they see,
These demand not that the things without them
Yield them love, amusement, sympathy.’ ”

Vivian sighed—a long, deep sigh that somehow drew them closer together.

“I don't believe I'll ever be like that,” she said.
“I'm afraid I'll always want sympathy and—love!”

"But it doesn't mean that, Vivian," explained Virginia. "I'm sure it doesn't. Of course, we all want those things—more than anything else in the world. But I think it means just as Miss Wallace said, that instead of demanding them we're to live so—so nobly that they will come to us—unsought, you know. Doesn't that make it a little easier, don't you think?"

The August night grew cold, and soon they went indoors to a friendship fire in the stone fire-place. They watched the flames roar up the chimney, then crackle cheerily, and at last flicker away to little blue tongues, which died almost as soon as they were born. There was no other light in the cabin. Virginia had said that none was needed, and she did not notice the apprehensive glances which the other Vigilantes cast around the shadowy, half-lit room. At last Vivian yawned.

"Nine o'clock," said Virginia. "Bed-time! I guess we can see to undress by moonlight, can't we?"

"What shall we do about the door?" asked Mary hesitatingly. "It won't lock, you know."

"That won't matter," said Virginia carelessly, while she covered the fire-brands with ashes. "There's no one in the world around. Besides, Watch and King will take care of things. You don't feel afraid, do you?"

"Oh, no!" announced Priscilla, trying her best to ape Virginia's careless manner, and determined to *act* like a good sport at least.

"Oh, no!" echoed Mary faintly.

Vivian was unspeakably glad that her lot had fallen with Virginia, and that their bed was in the farther corner of the living-room.

"I wish Dorothy were here!" Virginia called fifteen minutes later to the brave souls on the kitchen cot. "Then 'twould be perfectly perfect. Good-night, everybody. Sweet dreams!"

"Sweet dreams!" whispered Priscilla to Mary, while she clutched Mary's hand. "I don't expect to have a dream to-night! Mary, don't go to sleep before I do! We'll have to manage it somehow! I'll die if you do!"

"I won't," promised Mary.

But they were tired from excitement, and sleep

came in spite of unlocked doors. A half hour passed and every homesteader was sleeping soundly. The night wore on, midnight passed, and the still, stiller hours of the early morning came. It was yet dark when Mary was rudely awakened by her room-mate kicking her with all her might. She sat up in bed, dazed, frightened. Priscilla was clinging to her.

"Oh, Mary!" she breathed. "Listen! There are footsteps outside our window! There are, I tell you! Listen!"

Mary listened. Her heart was in her mouth and choking her. Yes, there were unmistakably footsteps outside. As they listened, the sound of breathing became apparent.

"It *isn't* our breathing, Mary," Priscilla whispered. "I tell you it *isn't*! It's—oh, the steps are coming nearer! They're on the path! Oh, Virginia! V-i-r-g-i-n-i-a! V-I-R-G-I-N-I-A!"

The last word ended in a mighty shout, which awoke Virginia and the terrified Vivian. Before the shout was fairly completed, the cot in the living-room was groaning beneath an added weight, and

Virginia, striving to rise, was encumbered by three pair of arms.

"Let me go, girls!" she cried. "Let me go, I tell you! No one's coming into this cabin unless I say so! Remember that!"

By this time the steps were on the porch. Virginia, finally free from embraces and on her feet, reached for Jean MacDonald's gun, and started for the door, which she was just too late to open. Instead, the visitor from without pushed it open, and the terrified Vigilantes on the bed, hearing Virginia laugh, raised their frightened heads from the pillows to meet the astonished gaze of poor old Siwash!

"Don't ever let the boys know," warned Virginia, as she returned from escorting Siwash to the gate and out upon the mesa. "We'll never hear the last of it if you do. 'Twas our own fault. We didn't close the gate, that's all, and Siwash has always loved company!"

So the boys never knew, though they wondered not a little at the significant and secret glances which the Vigilantes exchanged upon their arrival home

the next morning, and at intervals during the days that followed whenever homesteading became the topic of conversation. Once Aunt Nan, to whom also the secret was denied, attempted to probe the mystery, choosing Vivian as the most likely source of information.

“Did you really have a splendid time, Vivian?” she asked.

“We certainly did, Aunt Nan,” answered the loyal Vivian. “I never had a better time in all my life. Only one night of homesteading is enough for me. There are lots of things I envy Jean MacDonald, but homesteading isn’t one of them!”

CHAPTER VIII

AUNT DEBORAH HUNTER—PIONEER

AUNT DEBORAH HUNTER was driving from her ranch on Snake Creek to spend the day with her nephew, her grand-niece, and her grand-niece's guests. Clad in her best black silk dress, her black bonnet with the red cherries on the front, and her well-darned black cotton gloves, she was sitting up, very straight and stiff, beside Alec on the front seat. One would have said that her dignity forbade her to rest her shoulders, doubtless tired from the fifteen mile drive. Still, it was not altogether dignity which made Aunt Deborah scorn the support of the cushions which Alec had placed behind her. A great part of it was eagerness.

It had been a long time since she had left her ranch even for a day. No one there could attend to things quite so well as she herself, she always insisted. But now, between shearing and thresh-

ing, she had chosen a day upon which to accept Virginia's and her father's oft-repeated invitation, and it was a festive occasion for her. Truth to tell, she needed one day a year, she said, "to meet folks." For the remaining three hundred and sixty-four, the hired man, her two dogs, an occasional visitor, her thoughts, and the mountains were quite enough.

If the infrequent passer-by had paused long enough to look into Aunt Deborah's gray eyes beneath the cherry-trimmed bonnet, he would have seen therein the eagerness that made their owner scorn the sofa-pillows. It sparkled and beamed, now on this side, now on that, as she spied blue gentians blossoming in a hollow, and the gold which was already creeping over the wheat; it glowed as she looked at the mountains, and shone as she drew long breaths of the clear, bracing air; it was the self-same eagerness which lay deep in the gray eyes of her grand-niece Virginia.

As they drew near their journey's end, and came in sight of the white ranch-house behind the cottonwoods, Aunt Deborah made her final prepara-

tions. With her handkerchief she brushed every speck of dust from her black dress, settled the old-fashioned brooch at her neck, gave a final straightening to her bonnet, and pulled her cotton gloves on more smoothly before again folding her hands on her lap. She sat up straighter than ever as Alec turned the horse down the lane.

She seemed a little troubled about something when she saw the group of young people gathered at the porch and waiting for her.

"Alec," she whispered, "the cherries on my bonnet? They worry me. I want to be young, but being long toward eighty I mustn't be childish. What do you think, Alec? I wouldn't displease Virginia for anything!"

"Couldn't be nicer, ma'am," reassured Alec. "You need 'em for a touch o' life to your black."

Thus assured, the little old lady sat in state, her eyes glowing and her folded hands trembling with excitement.

"No, John," she said a few moments later, as she declined Mr. Hunter's outstretched arms. "No, thank you. When I get so I have to be lifted out,

I'm not coming any more. Turn just a little more, Alec. There! Here I am!"

It was her grand-niece whom she greeted first.

"My dear!" she cried, holding the tall, gray-eyed girl at arms' length. "How you grow! John, she's grown an inch since she rode over a month ago. I believe upon my soul she has. And looks more like you every day! Kiss your old aunt, dear! She's plum proud of you!"

Then she turned to the others, whom Virginia proudly introduced one by one.

"It's a blessed sight—all these young folks together," she said, shaking hands with them all. "Except for Pioneer Reunions, I haven't seen so many all to once for fifty years. And so you all come from away back East—the place we used to call home? It ain't that any longer to us old folks—but the memories are dear all the same!"

She stepped briskly upon the porch and toward the chair Virginia had placed for her. The Vigilantes and Aunt Nan watched her, fascinated. Virginia had told them of her wedding journey across the plains in '64; of the hardships and dangers she

had withstood; of lonely winter days in a sod hut, and of frightful perils from Indians. She seemed so little someway sitting there, so frail and wrinkled in the big chair. It was almost incredible that she had lived through such terrible things. They longed to hear the story of it all from her own lips. Virginia's recital was thrilling enough! What then must Aunt Deborah's be?

But Aunt Deborah was in no haste to talk about herself! She was far more interested in Virginia's friends—their respective homes and families—their school life and their plans and dreams for the future. Somehow the Vigilantes found it the easiest thing in the world to tell Aunt Deborah their ambitions. Aunt Nan found it easy, too, to speak of Virginia's mother to this dear old lady who had known and loved her. Virginia held Aunt Nan's hand close in her own as they heard Aunt Deborah tell of Mary Webster's coming to Wyoming; then a far rougher land than now; of her brave fight against homesickness; of her transformation of the Buffalo Horn School; and, finally, of the fierce struggle within herself over whether she should return

to Vermont or stay to marry a Wyoming ranchman.

"My nephew John," finished Aunt Deborah proudly. "A good man. None other than a good man could have won Mary Webster."

"Oh, I'm so glad she stayed!" cried Aunt Nan, a big lump in her throat and her eyes brimming with tears. "I'm so glad—Aunt Deborah!" She took one of the little old lady's hands in hers. "We're all together now," she said, "New England and the West. There's no difference any longer, is there, Virginia?"

"No, Aunt Nan," said Virginia, choking down the lump in her own throat. "There's not a bit of difference. And somehow I'm sure Mother knows. Aren't you, Aunt Deborah?"

"Something inside of me says that she does," said Aunt Deborah softly. "You see, dears, even Heaven can't blot out the lovely things of earth! At least, that's how it seems to me!"

A moment later, and Mr. Hunter came around the corner of the porch.

"John," cried Aunt Deborah gayly, "don't let's

worry one bit about this old world! With these young folks to write the books, and teach the schools, and take care of the homeless babies, we're safe for years to come! Come and tell me all about the wheat."

So the morning passed, and at noon Malcolm and Donald, Jack and Carver rode over for dinner, and for Aunt Deborah's stories, which Virginia had promised them. Aunt Deborah's talent for listening won them also, and they told her their ambitions quite as eagerly as the Vigilantes had done. All but Malcolm—he was strangely silent! Dinner was served on the lawn beneath the cottonwoods. Joe and Dick brought out the large table, which was soon set by Hannah and her four eager assistants. It was a jolly meal, quite the merriest person being Aunt Deborah.

"It wouldn't be so bad to grow old if you could be sure of being like that, would it?" whispered Carver Standish III to Malcolm.

"No," said Malcolm absent-mindedly, looking at Aunt Nan. "No, it wouldn't!"

"Now, Aunt Deborah," began Virginia, when the

things were cleared away, "you know you promised you'd tell stories. You will, won't you?"

Aunt Deborah's gray eyes swept the circle of interested faces raised to her own.

"Why, of course I will, Virginia," she said. "Where shall I begin?"

"At the very beginning," suggested Carver and Jack together. "We want it all, please."

"I'm glad William put marigolds on the table," Aunt Deborah began. "They make it easy for me to get started. They take me back fifty years ago to the day before I was married back in Iowa. Robert came up that evening, and saw me with a brown dress on and marigolds at my waist. 'Wear them to-morrow, Deborah,' says he. 'They're so bright and sunny and a good omen. You see, *we're* going to need sunshine on our wedding journey.' So the next day, when I was married, I wore some marigolds against my white dress. Some folks thought 'twas an awful queer thing to do. They said roses would have been much more *weddingy*, but Robert and I knew—and it didn't matter about other folks.

“The very next day we started for our new home across the plains. That was to be our wedding journey. ’Twas in July, 1864. We went to Council Bluffs to meet the others of our train. That was just a small town then. In about three days they’d all collected together, ready to start. We didn’t have so large a party as some. There were about seventy-five wagons in all, and two hundred persons, counting the children.

“I’ll never forget how I felt when I saw the last house go out of sight. I was sitting in the back of our wagon—we were near the end of the train that day—and Robert was ahead driving the oxen. But I guess he knew how I was feeling, for he came back and comforted me. There was comfort, too, in the way other folks besides me were feeling. There wasn’t many dry eyes on the day we swung into the plains, and yet we wouldn’t have turned back—no, not for worlds!”

Aunt Deborah paused now and then for the eager questions which her interested listeners asked. Yes, she told them, the wagons were great, white-covered prairie schooners—real houses

on wheels. Yes, the oxen were powerfully slow, but good, kind beasts. No, they were not all. There were mules in the train and a few horses. Most of those were ridden by scouts—men who received their food and bed for giving protection against the Indians. Yes, there were small children and tiny babies—whole families seeking new homes in this great land. Two babies were born on the journey. One lived to reach Montana and to grow into a strong, stout man; the other, a little girl, died on the way, and was buried somewhere in Nebraska.

“Yes, there were many hard things like that,” she said, “but we expected sadness and trouble and sorrow when we started out. We were not the first who had crossed the plains. There were pleasures, too. Nights when we stopped to camp there was a whole village of us. The men placed the wagons in a great circle, and within the circle was our fire and supper. We forgot to be lonely when the stars came out and looked down upon us—the only human things for miles around. We told stories and visited one another’s wagons, and were thankful to

be together. Friends were made then—real friends that always stuck!”

“Indians?” she asked in response to Jack’s interested questions. “Oh, yes, we found plenty of those to our sorrow! The first real hostile ones we met in Nebraska, six weeks after we started. Two days before they came I’d somehow felt as though we were having too smooth sailing for pioneers. One morning four of our men took horses and rode out searching for water. We never saw three of them again. At noon the only one left came riding up, half-dead from exhaustion and from wounds which the Indians had given him. He gave the alarm and soon we were ready for them, our wagons in a circle, and every man armed. Some women, too.” Aunt Deborah’s head rose proudly. “I shot my first shot that day, and I killed an Indian. Robert was proud of me that night!”

So the journey went on, she told them. The long, hot days of midsummer on the plains shortened into the cooler ones of September and October. All were wearying, of course, but few actually dangerous. The attacks from Indians were rare. They seemed

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to have learned that more could be gained by friendly bartering. By October the train had left the plains and was going higher into the mountains. The air grew more exhilarating. There was less sickness in the village on wheels. One October morning they found a light covering of snow.

"I can't tell you how that snow made me feel," said Aunt Deborah. "It made me afraid somehow. I thought of the days I must stay alone that coming winter while Robert was away. But my fears went later in the day when the sun once more made the land like summer.

"It was early November when we reached our journey's end in a Montana valley. A few sod huts were there to welcome us, and the day after our arrival other pioneers drifted in from the south. The spot was chosen because it was near water, and because there seemed to be plenty of wild game. Some of our train pushed on to the gold mines, another day's journey and more, but it was the gravel beds of the creek where we were promised gold, and we decided to stay in the valley.

"We built a sod hut like those around us, and

began to get settled. Our poor cows and horses were glad enough to rest and crop the grass in among the sagebrush. It was a forlorn-looking village enough when all our huts were done. I wish you could have seen it! There we spent our first winter—the happiest one of my whole life. Yes, my dears,” she said, looking into their doubtful, surprised faces, “it *was* the happiest. There were dangers, of course, and all kinds of hardships, but those made no difference. Of course there were lonely days when I longed for home. When Robert was there, I didn’t mind the smoky, crowded hut, but on the days when he had to be away I felt as though I couldn’t stand it much longer. We lived on meat and milk that winter. The flour gave out and there was no way to get more, so we had no bread. All the provisions had been used before February came, and we could get no more before spring. Buffalo meat and elk, we ate mostly. Yes, Virginia, what is it?”

“The story, Aunt Deborah, about the Indian coming into the hut?”

“Oh, yes,” said Aunt Deborah, “Virginia always

must have that. It happened on one day that Robert was away. He had ridden to the mining camp to try to get flour. I was all alone in the hut. There had been no news of Indians around, so imagine my surprise when the door was pushed open and an Indian walked in. I knew by his signs that he wanted food, so I gave him all I had. He drank all the milk in the hut, and some oat cakes which I had made from our last bit of oat-meal. I remember how angry I was, for I had been saving them especially for Robert, but I dared not refuse. Then he began admiring a rug which we had brought from home. It was on the bed in the corner. He asked me for it, and I refused. Then he insisted, and I still refused. But he wanted that rug, and was going to have it. At last he just grabbed it, and made for the door. That was too much for me. My grandmother had given Robert and me that rug for a wedding gift, and no Indian was going to take it away. I snatched Robert's gun from the corner and raised it.

“‘Drop it, or I shoot you!’ I screamed.

“I guess he knew I meant what I said, for he

dropped the rug and hurried out of the cabin. I don't know how long I sat there facing the door. I was afraid he would bring others back, but he never came again. When Robert came that night, I was still facing the door with the gun. When I saw him, I burst out crying, and cried and cried. The strain had been too much for me."

So Aunt Deborah's stories went on—of the village attacked by night, and her fearful ride to the little fort for protection; of the Vigilantes and their determined hunting-down of robbers and road-agents; of a sickness which broke out in the town toward spring; of hunger and privations—the varied, fascinating, almost incredible tales of pioneer life. Then, like oases, would come stories of Christmas festivities, and of merry, laughing times all together. The minutes, half-hours, and hours flew by as they listened.

"My Thought Book will never hold them all," Priscilla whispered to Virginia.

"But in the spring," Aunt Deborah finished, casting an anxious glance at the sun, "all was different. A trail to Salt Lake had been opened and provi-

sions came through by stage. I'll never forget the morning the first stage train came. Men had use for their money then, though many of them used gold weighed out in little scales. Flour was a dollar and a half a pound, calico fifty cents a yard, and eggs five dollars a dozen. Shoes were priceless. One man bought a pair for thirty dollars. I remember that Robert and I wanted to give our neighbor's little girl a birthday present. After much thought we decided on an apple, and paid a dollar for it."

"I don't see how you did it," said Vivian, who had not spoken a word since Aunt Deborah began. "I don't believe girls of to-day could live through such terrible things!"

"Yes, they could, dear," affirmed Aunt Deborah, "only the need hasn't come. When it does, you'll all be ready. Of course, the Pioneer Days are over, but there is always need of pioneers—for Vigilantes, like yourselves."

A half hour later and Aunt Deborah was again in the wagon beside Alec—again very straight and very stiff. She had had a beautiful day, she said,

smiling upon them all. She had gathered thoughts and memories enough for another year.

William came up to the carriage just as Alec lifted the reins. His hands were filled with marigolds—brown and orange and yellow.

“I thought you might like ’em, ma’am,” he said shyly.

A light came into Aunt Deborah’s gray eyes.

“Like them, William!” she cried. “Like them! They’ll give me even more memories—the very sweetest of my life.”

CHAPTER IX

MR. CRUSOE OF CRIPPLE CREEK

MR. CRUSOE was washing an extra shirt in the ford between Elk Creek Valley and the Gap. The absence of soap was a distinct disadvantage, but water, a corrugated stone, and Mr. Crusoe's diligence were working wonders. A short distance away among the quaking-asps smoldered the embers of a small fire; a blackened and empty bean-can on the hearth-stone, together with a two-tined fork, bore evidence of a recent breakfast.

His washing completed, Mr. Crusoe turned his attention to his personal appearance. Deep in the waters of Elk Creek he plunged his arms, bare to the elbow, and washed his neck and face. From one pocket he drew a soiled and folded towel, which upon being unrolled disclosed a diminutive brush and an almost toothless comb. With these he proceeded to arrange his somewhat long and dripping

black hair. His two weeks' old whiskers apparently worried him, for he pulled them meditatively; but since he was far from a barber and carried no shaving appliances, the brush and comb must suffice for them also. Finally he took his battered old hat from a nearby branch, brushed it carefully, arranged the crown so that fewer holes appeared, and put it upon his head. His clean shirt, spread upon a quaking-asp but by no means dry, afforded the best of reasons why he should not hurry; so, drawing a stained and stubby pipe and sack of tobacco from another pocket, Mr. Crusoe lay beneath a friendly cottonwood at the water's edge and gave himself to quiet contemplation.

The morning was perfect, and no one could appreciate it more keenly than Mr. Crusoe, wanderer that he was. He blew a great mouthful of blue smoke into the still air, watched it circle lazily upward, and blew another to hasten the progress of the first. His black eyes, peering from a forest of eyebrows and whiskers, looked long upon the blossoms that clothed Elk Creek Valley—sunflowers, early golden-rod and purple thistles—swept the

friendly, tumbling foot-hills and sought beneath the over-hanging trees for the secrets of the creek. It was a morning to love things, Mr. Crusoe thought to himself. He was glad that he had left his comrades of the railroad tracks; more glad that he had abandoned freight-jumping for a season; most glad that he had decided to work during the early fall months. Then with money in his pockets and a new suit of clothes upon his back, he might go back to Cripple Creek whence he had come.

A few minutes later his contemplations were broken by the sound of horses' feet coming through the Gap. He sat up, interested, and removed his pipe. In another moment as he met the wide-open eyes of two very much startled young ladies, his hat followed. Mr. Crusoe was used to speaking to persons whom he met in his journeyings. It was one of the many joys of the road.

"Good-mornin', comrades," said he.

The hearts of Mary and Vivian leaped into their throats. Their eyes, leaving Mr. Crusoe's, saw in one terrifying instant the shirt drying on the quaking-asp, the smoldering fire, the empty bean-can.

This man was a tramp! He belonged to that disgusting clan of vagabonds who asked for food at back-doors, and whom one, if frightened into doing it, fed on back stoops as one fed the cat! He, like his fellows, would inspire one to lock all the doors at noonday, and to tell one's neighbors there was a tramp abroad!

"Good-mornin'," said Mr. Crusoe again. "It's a fine day."

This time Mary answered. She did not dare keep silent. The tramp might become angry.

"Good-morning," she faltered.

Vivian said nothing. She was waiting for Mary to plan a means of escape. Meanwhile Siwash and his companion, feeling their reins tighten, had stopped and were nibbling at the quaking-asps, quite undisturbed.

Mr. Crusoe rose, hat in hand.

"Was you plannin' to ford, young ladies?" he asked politely.

The vanishing flanks of two horses, unceremoniously yanked away from their luncheon and turned toward the prairie, were his only answer. Mr.

130 Virginia of Elk Creek Valley

Crusoe gazed wonderingly into a cloud of dust. Then he felt of his washing on the quaking-asp. It was dry enough. Laying his pipe and hat on the ground, he proceeded to get into the clean shirt.

"Poor little things!" he said from its somewhat damp depths. "They was plum scared of me!"

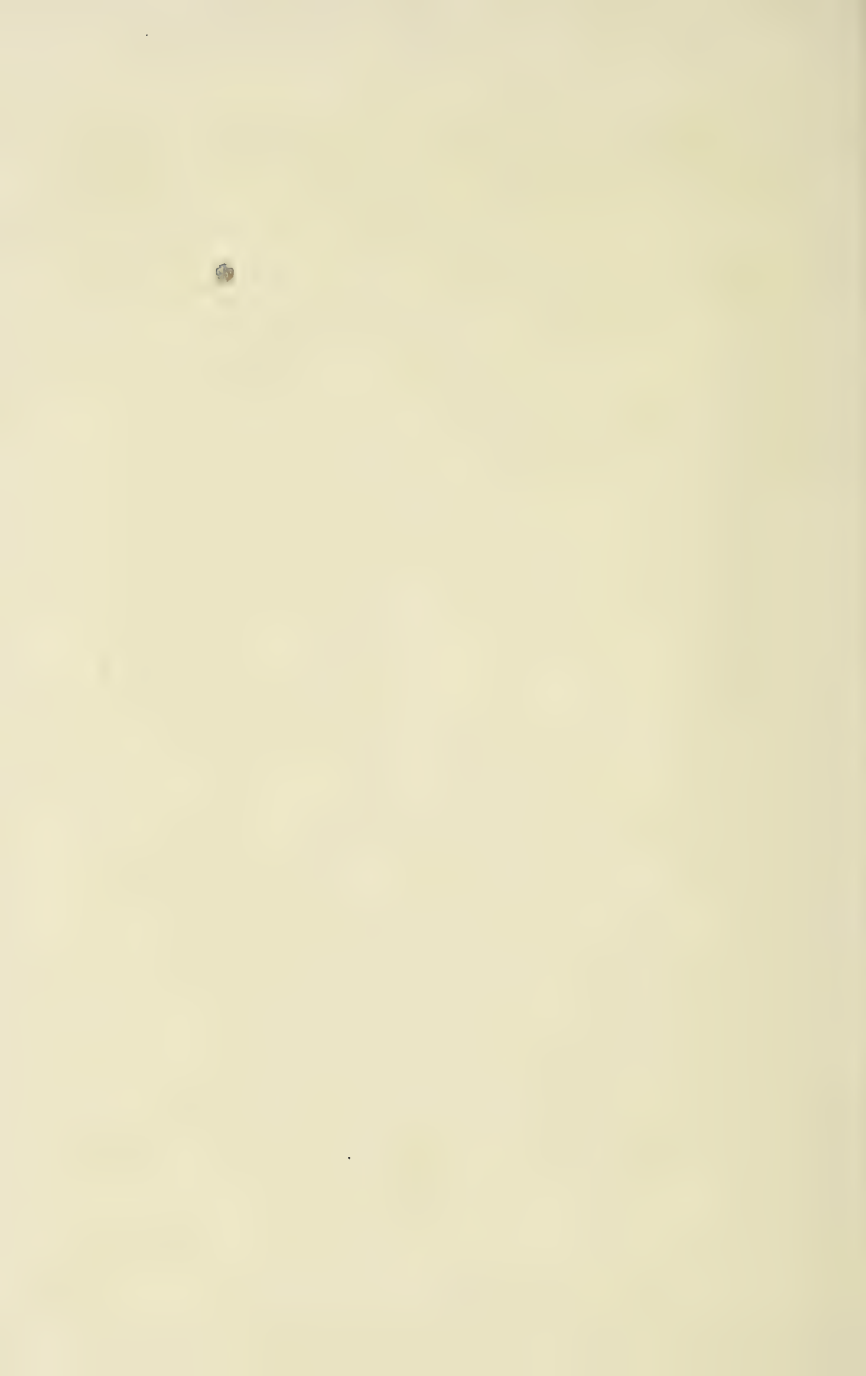
The shirt on, he did its mate into a bundle, cut a forked stick upon which to sling it, stamped out the last ember of his dying fire, took his hat and pipe, and started north up the creek trail.

Vivian and Mary did not stop their wild gallop until they were well in sight of the nearest house on the prairie. Blue gentians for Miss Wallace, which had been their errand, were quite forgotten. So also was the glory of the morning. Instead, there ever rose before their still startled eyes a black-whiskered, coatless man, smoking the stub of a dirty pipe beneath a cottonwood.

"Mary," said Vivian, gathering courage as the Keith house came into view, and breaking a long, frightened silence, "Mary, did you ever see any one so villainous-looking in your life—outside of the



“MR. CRUSOE GAZED WONDERINGLY”



movies, I mean? I guess my heart will never stop thumping! I wish Virginia had been with us! She's always saying there's no one around here to harm any one. I just wish she had!"

"I sort of wish we hadn't run so," returned Mary, pulling her horse down to a walk. "Maybe he wasn't any one harmful at all, only he scared me so I never stopped to think. I'd hate to be a snob, even to a tramp!"

"I wouldn't! I glory in it! And, besides, you needn't worry. It takes time to be a snob, and we didn't waste a moment. Here's the Keith house. Hadn't we best go in for a moment? There's Carver now playing with Kenneth."

The Keiths, upon hearing the story, quieted Vivian's fears, and confirmed Mary's increasing regret. The man was only a hobo, Donald said, doubtless seeking work. They looked unmistakably rough, but were often good fellows inside. Probably he wouldn't have frightened them for the world.

"I wish this fellow would stray our way," he added. "We're going to be in need of extra hands

when threshing comes, and it won't be long now. Dad would welcome him all right."

Vivian stared at Donald, incredulous and speechless. There was no need of asking him if he meant what he had just said. Apparently that horrible creature back there by the creek, the very remembrance of whom caused cold shivers to run over Vivian, would be given a welcome by the Keith family. Vivian's nose, already a trifle high, rose higher. Democracy was unquestionably a splendid attribute. Since knowing Virginia and coming West, she was more inclined to believe in it than ever. But this was too much!

An hour later they were riding homeward, their hands filled with gentians. Donald and Jack had ridden back with them to the ford to act as protectors, and, Vivian secretly believed, to interview the hobo, were he still there, upon the subject of threshing. But only an empty bean-can and the charred remnants of a fire bore evidence of the wayfarer. He had gone! Reassured, they had gathered gentians to their hearts' content, left the boys upon the prairie, and ridden homeward.

Mr. Hunter came to meet them as they rode beneath the cottonwoods.

"Crusoe," he called to some one on the other side of the porch, "here's your first job! Take these horses to the corral."

An attempt to describe the sensations which swept over Mary and Vivian when they recognized their acquaintance of the morning would be impossible. Unable for a moment to dismount, they sat in their saddles and stared. Mr. Crusoe, undoubtedly sensible of their surprise, patted Siwash, who responded gladly in spite of black whiskers and a battered hat. Mr. Hunter, thinking that the flowers might be the reason of their delay, relieved them of the gentians. Mary and Vivian, thus assisted, finally fell from the saddles, and followed Mr. Hunter to the porch.

"Mr. Hunter," gasped Vivian when the new man had taken the horses, "do you know who he is? He's a hobo! Donald said so! We met him this morning down at the ford—Mary and I. He scared us almost to death! He had washed a shirt and it was drying on the bushes, and he ate canned

beans for breakfast right out of the can with a dirty, bent, old fork. He was lying under a tree and smoking a hideous pipe as we rode up! I never was so horrified in all my life! And, Mr. Hunter, he took off his hat and spoke to us! I thought we'd die! Siwash would eat the bushes, and I thought we'd never escape! He's not going to stay here after he has something to eat, is he, Mr. Hunter? You don't know how awful he is!"

Vivian stopped—merely for breath. Mr. Hunter with a mighty effort repressed a smile. Mary was torn between a desire to play fair and the awful remembrance of her fright. She said nothing.

"Vivian," said Mr. Hunter, "out here we've learned not to judge persons by whether or not they wash in the creek and eat canned beans. I'm sorry Crusoe frightened you. He isn't exactly captivating in appearance, I'll admit, but, from what I can gather, he seems to be a pretty good sort. Any man's worth a try-out, you know. He's looking for work, and now that threshing is coming on I'm looking for an extra man, so he's going to stay

here a spell. These fellows who take to the road, you see, fill a great need out here in this country. We depend on one or more of them showing up about this time of year."

Vivian was still staring, unable to speak. Mary, desirous that Mr. Crusoe should not misunderstand their flight, explained the affair to Mr. Hunter, a little more rationally than Vivian had done.

"You see," she finished, "it's just that we aren't used to seeing persons like that, and he *did* look fierce, Mr. Hunter. I wish you'd explain to him how it was. I shouldn't want to be rude even to a hobo."

Mr. Hunter smiled.

"He'll understand, Mary," he said. "In fact, he does already, for when he saw you riding home he told me about how frightened you were at the ford. Don't be at all alarmed, Vivian," he called, for Vivian was hurrying into the house, her head high. "He's a gentleman—underneath the whiskers and the shirt."

So Mr. Crusoe stayed on at the Hunter ranch. The men liked him—that was plain to be seen.

Every evening their laughter echoed from the bunkhouse where Mr. Crusoe was entertaining them with his songs and stories. Even the silent William was loud in his praise, and Mr. Weeks, the foreman, in speaking of his ability and readiness to work, suggested a permanent position. Mary allowed but a day to go by before apologizing for her flight from the ford, and after Mr. Crusoe's courteous acceptance became his firm adherent, much to Vivian's disgust. Even Aunt Nan found him interesting, while Virginia and Priscilla listened eagerly to his tales of Cripple Creek. They were collecting theme material, they told the disdainful Vivian.

Apparently Mr. Crusoe had stormed and taken the Hunter ranch. Only one member of the family remained his enemy. Vivian was still unconvinced. To her every one else on the ranch had taken his place among the number of those condemned by the apostle, "who, having eyes, see not." In her suspicious eyes Mr. Crusoe was a "ravening wolf" of whom she should beware. When she had an infrequent occasion to address him she used an offended dignity, tinged with scorn; when his name

was brought into the conversation she remained silent, secure in the knowledge that some day they would all see this tramp in his true light!

In three days Vivian had worked herself into a state from the eminence of which she looked down with protecting pity upon Aunt Nan, the other Vigilantes, and Mr. Hunter. They were being hoodwinked, and she alone was left to guard their interests. Harrowing memories of tales she had read, terrifying visions of escaped criminals whom she had witnessed in the "movies," and who exactly resembled Mr. Crusoe, came to disturb her rest and haunt her dreams. She was a quaking detective, watching Mr. Crusoe's every act, and discovering treachery and evil design in the most innocent of them.

On the fourth day following Mr. Crusoe's advent matters approached a climax. In the early afternoon Mr. Hunter, driving to town on business, had taken the other Vigilantes with him. Vivian, with letters to write, had remained at home, feeling safe with Aunt Nan. In her stimulated imagination Mr. Crusoe had been behaving peculiarly all

the morning, and not for worlds would she have stayed alone.

Hannah left soon after the others, going for raspberries up the canyon; Aunt Nan, thoughtful and strangely silent, was in the living-room, where within an hour she was joined by Malcolm Keith; Vivian sat beneath the vines in the corner of the porch, and tried to center her attention upon a letter she was writing to Dorothy. She was not eminently successful. Grave apprehensions, strange forebodings, filled her heart. Once Mr. Crusoe passed empty-handed before the porch. He did not see Vivian, although he might easily have detected the beating of her heart. She watched him pause, study for a brief moment the house, its doors and windows, and then pass on. He was seizing the opportunity while they were all away, Vivian told herself, to become better acquainted with his surroundings. Then some day, not far distant, or some night, he——!

She jumped from her seat and ran indoors. At that moment she wanted company more than anything else in the world. Sunny as it was out-

side, the silence worried her. There was something portentous even in the singing of the August insects. Aunt Nan's genuine interest in Mr. Crusoe and his welfare would probably prevent Vivian from giving expression to her new-born fears; but at least nearness to some one might quiet the misgivings which were tormenting her.

She reached the living-room door, and stood still, unable to make her presence known, and, for a moment, unable to run away. Aunt Nan and Malcolm Keith were standing by the big western window which faced the prairie and the distant mountains. Malcolm's arm was around Aunt Nan, and her head was on his shoulder. As Vivian stood transfixed to the spot by a strange Something, Malcolm bent his head, and—Vivian fled, unperceived!

That same strange Something, stronger than her fear of the silence or even of Mr. Crusoe, was making her breath come in gasps as she sank into her chair and tried to collect her scattered senses. Truly Life was being too generous to her that day! So Malcolm and Aunt Nan loved each other! That

was clearly unmistakable. She was sorry she had intruded, though she knew they had not heard her. In that last moment before she had found strength to run away she felt as though she had come unbidden into a sacred place. Her cheeks burned at the thought. How surprised the girls would be when she told them! No, she would not tell! It was Aunt Nan's secret—hers and Malcolm's!

Fifteen minutes later, still unperceived and to all appearances quite forgotten, she sat in her chair and watched Aunt Nan and Malcolm go down the lane beneath the cottonwoods, and on toward the foothills. They had forgotten her very existence. She was all alone—alone with Mr. Crusoe and the silence. At that very instant Mr. Crusoe again passed before the porch—again paused to study the house. This time he held a key in his hand—a large key on a string which he twisted and untwisted as it swung from his big, brown finger. Vivian knew that key. It belonged to the root-cellar just beyond the kitchen, and it hung in Mr. Hunter's office above his desk. She had seen Hannah take it a dozen times, and once Mr. Hunter had given it to Virginia, asking

her to get some papers from a desk he kept down there. Why should Mr. Crusoe want to go to the root-cellar?

Something told Vivian that the time for her to act had come; that only she could save the Hunter fortunes from oncoming disaster. As Mr. Crusoe rounded the farther corner of the porch, and started in the direction of the root-cellar, Vivian ran through the house and into Hannah's spotless kitchen. A new sense of responsibility gave birth to a bran-new sense of courage. Vivian, watching from the kitchen window, saw Mr. Crusoe go into the cellar. That was enough.

Running to Virginia's room, she grasped the little rifle which stood in the corner. It was the only gun in the house which Vivian had ever used, and her one experience with it had not given her a far-reaching knowledge of fire-arms. Still, it was a gun, and guns concealed cowardice, and lent power and dignity to one's bearing. Vivian knew that it was loaded. Virginia always kept it ready in case a gopher poked his inquisitive little nose above the ground. She knew, too, that a quick push of her

thumb would drive back the safety and leave the gun ready to shoot.

She ran down the hall and out the back door toward the root cellar. Her heart was in her mouth, her breath came in gasps, her wide-open blue eyes were filled with terror. When she reached the stone steps leading down to the cellar she looked far less a heroine than a much frightened little girl. Still, there was the gun! Vivian's nervous fingers kept pushing the safety on and off—a rather terrifying sound to the ears of a much surprised man, who, papers in hand, was coming up the steps.

Vivian saw the papers. She was right! Mr. Crusoe had been rifling Mr. Hunter's private possessions. She raised the gun with a trembling hand.

"Mr. Crusoe," she faltered, "this gun is loaded, and if you try to pass me, I—I'm very sure I shall shoot you. You sit down there in the cellar and wait for Mr. Hunter."

Mr. Crusoe sat down. He was too surprised to do anything else. He had faced guns many times before in his varied existence, but never had he been confronted by a shaking .22 in the trembling hands

of a very nervous young lady. Moreover, the sound of a safety clicking nervously back and forth is not conducive to peace. Mr. Crusoe did not expect Vivian to shoot him, but he did entertain a fear that the gun might go off in his direction and in spite of her. Considering silence the better part of valor, he accordingly sought the farthest corner of the cellar and hoped for the best.

Vivian sat upon the top step, the gun upon her knees. She had not looked for such non-resistance on the part of Mr. Crusoe. Indeed, he looked less fierce than she had ever seen him. Could she have observed the amused smile which was quivering beneath Mr. Crusoe's black whiskers as he began more fully to understand this peculiar situation, she would have been much puzzled. To her, he was a cringing suppliant, and she a distinct conqueror.

Still the minutes dragged themselves very slowly away. It seemed two hours, though it was in reality but ten minutes before conqueror and conquered heard the roll of returning wheels, the sound of voices calling for Vivian, the approach of hurrying footsteps. Mr. Crusoe stirred uneasily. He

would have willingly saved Vivian from the embarrassment which he knew was bound to follow, but it had been impossible. Vivian's heart beat wildly. Now, at least, they would understand that she had been right all along; now, perhaps, they would no longer think her such a coward!

Embarrassment did follow! Embarrassment and tears and explanations and not a little ill-concealed amusement. For one long hour Vivian, in spite of sympathy and understanding and genuine admiration, wished she had never been born. In that hour she discovered that a finer courage is necessary to admit a mistake and to begin anew than to besiege a hobo in a root-cellar. But she proved equal to the task, and Mr. Crusoe in the part he played showed himself the gentleman he really was. For when Vivian was convinced that Mr. Crusoe had been given the key by Mr. Hunter, that he had been told to fetch the papers, and that he really was trustworthy after all, she dried her tears, donned a fresh middy, and went quite alone to offer her apologies.

She found Mr. Crusoe by the bunk-house. He

had shaved in the meantime, and when Vivian saw his clean firm chin, she knew it was partly the whiskers which had made her level the gun at him.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Crusoe," she stammered. "You see, I thought you were just a tramp, and at home we are always afraid of them. But I know now you aren't. I know I've been wrong all the time, and—oh, I'm awfully glad the gun didn't go off!"

Mr. Crusoe removed his battered old hat and offered his freshly-washed hand.

"I'm glad, too, Miss Vivian," he said. "If it had, perhaps I couldn't have told you how much pluck I think you've got stored away inside of you. And as for your being suspicious of the likes o' me, I don't wonder a mite. Only, you see, there are tramps and tramps. To the best of us, I guess trampin' just means followin' roads that lead to shelters—to *homes*, you see! And now you know I'm not the kind you thought I was, this here ranch looks like a mighty good home to me."

"Then you won't go back to Cripple Creek?" asked Vivian. "If I were you I'd stay right here."

"That's what I'm plannin' on," said Mr. Crusoe.

CHAPTER X

A LETTER FROM DOROTHY

"It seems an age, doesn't it, since we've had a real meeting," said the founder of the Vigilantes, "and yet it's only nine weeks ago this very identical day. I guess it's because the places are so far apart and so different. The last time 'twas on the big rock back of the Retreat, and now it's away out here in the Land of our Dreams. Oh, you'll never, never know what it's meaning to me to have you all out here, because it's one of the things you feel inside but can never, never tell!"

"I guess we know," cried Priscilla, "because we're feeling it, too! Every day I think I'll die if I get any happier, but I guess happiness is one of the things you can keep pouring into your heart like love—without its overflowing."

"It's the very same way about pouring it out, too," said Mary. "There's always plenty left like the oil in the Bible story."

"Aren't the mountains way off there blue?" cried Vivian. "I think blue's the happiest color in the world. I'll never say that I feel *blue* again now that I've seen the mountains."

They had climbed to the summit of Spruce Ridge for their Vigilante meeting—the first formal one they had held since their arrival in Virginia's country. A letter from Dorothy, coming an hour ago, bore the inscription, "To be read at a Vigilante meeting," and in order to be honest to the letter, as well as in spirit, they had decided upon a place apart and assembled.

"After all, it's better to come away like this, isn't it?" asked Virginia. "There's a queer, common feeling that doesn't come when we just sit on the porch and talk. And I love this sweep of country from the Ridge. It's real Vigilante land. Now let's have the letter, Priscilla. I'm wild to hear it. It's the very first we've had in a month."

The secretary of the order broke a large amount of sealing-wax, unfolded sheets of blue stationery, and began:

“ ‘A PIECE OF HEAVEN IN CALIFORNIA,

“ ‘Aug. 11, 19—.

“ ‘DEAR FELLOW VIGILANTES:

“ ‘I’ve been trying desperately to write you for weeks and weeks, but you’ve no idea what the cares of a household are, especially when you have a child around.’ ”

“ ‘A child!’ ” cried all the Vigilantes at once. “ ‘What child?’ ”

Priscilla continued:

“ ‘But before I tell you about *Virginia Winthrop Richards*, I must say that the summer is being even more wonderful than Dad and I ever dreamed. I never got so well-acquainted with my own father in all my life, and he’s been a perfect darling to devote days and days to me. The bungalow is more heavenly than ever. It’s positively buried in roses and heliotrope, and you’d never know it had a chimney. You’d think that a huge geranium was growing right out of the roof. The front porch looks out upon the sea. Oh, it’s such a dark, deep, sparkly blue! And

when the sky is blue, too, and the sand is golden, and the white gulls skim next the water—nothing could be more beautiful in all the world! I think of you a hundred times a day, and wish that you were here. So does Dad. I've told him all about the Vigilantes, and he's so interested. He says he's thankful every day that I have such fine friends at St. Helen's. In fact, I just know he's more pleased with me than ever before. I think he sees there's hope ahead, and it's a very comforting assurance.

“‘Now I must tell you about Virginia Winthrop Richards. I know you're consumed with curiosity. If you could see her, you'd be consumed with envy. She is seven years old and all pink and white and blue and gold. Her cheeks are just the color of wild roses, and her eyes deep blue—almost like the water—and her hair golden brown with lights in it. I dress her in pink or blue or white all the time. One day two weeks ago Dad and I went to Los Angeles to buy clothes for her. I don't believe I ever had quite such a good time in all my life. 'Twas

just like shopping for one's very own child. I put my hair up high for the occasion, and endeavored to look matronly, but I guess I failed, for when I saw a ravishing pink dress and said, "I guess it's too small for my little girl," the stupid clerk laughed in my face.

"We bought the sweetest things you ever saw! Hair-ribbons and adorable shoes and socks striped like sticks of candy and little fairy night-dresses all trimmed in lace. Then Dad bought some toys. I let him do that. He bought a doll and books and a cart and horses, for we want Virginia to be a trifle boyish, too, you see. While he was doing it, his eyes just beamed and beamed. He said he felt just as he did when I was little and he bought toys for me. When we reached home and showed the things to Virginia Winthrop Richards, I thought she'd die of happiness. Really, I didn't know but that we'd lose her after all!

"But here I am dressing my child for you, and you don't even know who she is! She wasn't anybody but *Minnie* and *No. 31* until three weeks

ago. I've always thought it would be a heavy cross enough to be named *Minnie* anyway, even though you had a respectable surname, but to be *Minnie* without any surname at all, and *No. 31* in addition, seem to me the depths of misery. We found her in the Home for Friendless Children, and I'll always believe that an angel led us there! Dad and I went to the city three weeks ago this very Sunday and walked by the Home. We didn't even know 'twas there—just stumbled upon it while we were roaming around in search of adventure. Poor little *31* was sitting under a tree on the lawn holding a shingle and singing to it. I'll never forget how she looked. Her curls were braided up tight, and tied with a shoe-string, and she was dressed in a hideous blue-checked thing, but even those drawbacks couldn't spoil her. Dad and I just stopped and stared, and then we walked up the steps and in at the door.

“ “Whose child is that out there on the lawn?” Dad asked the matron who greeted us at the office entrance.

“ “She was a tall, stern-looking person in a shirt-

waist and a high, starched collar. You just couldn't imagine her holding a baby, or one cuddling up against her neck. She said *No. 31* was nobody's child. She had been left in an old basket on the steps six years ago. You see, she isn't one of those children you read about with beautifully embroidered clothes and gold locket and one thousand dollars in bills under her pillow. She didn't have any name or notes or requests for whoever took her to call at the bank for a fortune when she was twenty-one. She was just wrapped in an old blanket and left there. But Dad and I don't care!

“When the matron saw that we were interested, she asked if we didn't want to borrow *No. 31* for a few days. She said they sometimes lent children for two weeks or so. When she said it, she sounded just as though a child were a typewriter or a vacuum cleaner, sent on ten days' free trial. I looked at Dad and Dad looked at me, and then he said, “We'll take her!” It didn't take long for the matron to do up her few clothes and to get her ready. She was so glad to make

the loan that she hurried. Little *No. 31* was so surprised that she didn't know whether to be happy or not. Perhaps she didn't understand what it was to be really happy, but she knows now! She's positively radiant!

"I can't explain how it seemed when we brought her home. Somehow 'twas as though we'd just begun to be a *real* family. She snuggled between Dad and me on the front seat of the car, and kept looking from one to the other of us. I think it was her name that first gave us the idea of keeping her. We couldn't call that adorable child *No. 31*, and we wouldn't call her *Minnie*. Of course we couldn't name a borrowed child, and so after I'd given her a bath, and we'd seen how truly sweet and adorable she was, we decided that at all events she should never, never go back to that Home, which is a satire on the word. At first Dad thought he knew of a fine home for her with some friends of his who haven't any children, but after the ten days' free trial were over we knew we just couldn't give her up. Best of all, Mrs. Shute, the housekeeper,

who's been with us all summer, loves her to death, and she's promised to stay right on with Dad, and keep house for him next winter in Los Angeles. So you see Dad has a home and another child, and he's the happiest man in California.

“ ‘He let me do the naming, and, of course, I consulted my child. I couldn't think of anything lovelier than to name her for the two founders of the Vigilantes, and after I'd told her all about you she was pleased as pleased could be. I let her choose between *Priscilla Hunter Richards* and *Virginia Winthrop Richards*, and she took *Virginia* and named her new doll *Priscilla*. I wish I could have named her for you and Mary, Vivian, dear, but Dad thought two names were enough.

“ ‘We're the very happiest family you ever saw. Virginia fits in better every day. She's learning such sweet manners—I tell Dad it just shows she must be sweet inside! She's learning to read and to write, too. We have a lesson every morning after breakfast. The other day I bought the pattern of a little dress, and Mrs. Shute helped

me cut it out and make it. I never felt so proud in all my life. I'm obliged to be more *vigilant* than ever, because Virginia does and says everything that I do. The other day I said I should certainly die if I didn't get a letter from some of you, and she was quite frightened. So I guess I'll have to be more moderate in speech after this.

“ ‘There's one thing more I must tell you before I stop. I saw Imogene the other day. Dad and Virginia and I were walking by one of the big hotels here, when an automobile came up to the curbing. You can just imagine how surprised I was when Imogene and Mrs. Meredith stepped out. There was a young man with them whom I didn't like very well. He had a queer way of looking at you, and was over-dressed, I thought. Imogene looked very handsome, and, oh, loads older! I felt a perfect baby beside her! Mrs. Meredith was just the same, only even more elaborately gowned than she used to be when she visited Imogene. Imogene was as surprised as I was, I think, though she didn't show it. She and

her mother shook hands with me, and she introduced her friend. I was so excited I didn't hear his name at all. She told me she was going to be married at Christmas time, and so wouldn't be back at St. Helen's, and Mr. Whoever-he-was laughed and said Imogene had been to school long enough. Dad and I asked them to tea with us, but they said they were just hurrying through and couldn't come.

“ ‘When they left us and went into the hotel I had the queerest feeling. ’Twas just as though I had said good-by to Imogene forever—just as though she'd gone away into a different world. And the queerest part of it all was that I didn't care very much. It seemed years since I had cared for her—years since we had done things together at St. Helen's. That night after I had put Virginia to bed, and come out on the porch with Dad, a big machine flew by our house. I heard some one laugh, and knew it was Imogene. She hadn't been hurrying through; she just hadn't cared to come. I suppose it ought to have hurt me, but it didn't. I was glad she'd stopped caring, too,

the way I had. Then, at least, neither of us would be hurt. The only thing I'm sorry about is that Imogene has gone into that kind of a world. I don't believe it can give the best kind of happiness, do you?

"It's nearly church time, and I must hurry. We're all going together. It's Virginia's very first service, except for those at the Home, and I do hope she'll be good. I've been instructing her for days—telling her just what to do and what not to do. I'm afraid I'll send out many thoughts in your direction, but Miss Wallace says they're prayers anyway—that is, the kind I'd send to you, so I guess it will be all right. There's Virginia calling now.

"Dearest love,

"DOROTHY.

"P.S. After service. She was angelic! When she knelt and closed her eyes, she looked like one of Raphael's cherubs. Dad wiped his eyes—I saw him—and I could have cried for happiness. The sermon was on "Vigilance"—wasn't that strange? The minister spoke about watch-

ing for opportunities to serve, for in so doing, he said, we served ourselves most of all. Dad looked at me then and smiled, and we both looked at Virginia, our opportunity. She was finding *A's* in the prayer-book.

“This is a selfish letter—all about me—but I knew you’d want to know about your namesake. Write me right away. We’ll be watching every mail.

“‘DOROTHY.’”

They looked at one another with shining eyes as Priscilla folded the letter. Mary was the first to speak.

“Isn’t it the loveliest thing in all the world for Dorothy to do?” she said.

“Wonderful!” cried the two who possessed a namesake.

“I think we ought to make Virginia Winthrop Richards a present,” proposed Priscilla. “I never felt so important in all my life, did you, Virginia?”

“Never!” said Virginia. “Why so quiet, Vivian?”

“I was thinking about Imogene,” said Vivian.

"I'm wondering why I don't care much either. It's strange when I cared so much for her—only four months ago."

In their excitement over Dorothy's child, the others had for the moment forgotten Imogene.

"I guess it's because we went as far as the cross-roads together," explained Virginia, "and then chose different paths. I feel the same way Dorothy does. I'm sorry for Imogene, but I don't feel any great loss myself."

"I propose we adjourn," said the excited Priscilla, "and go down and tell the news to Aunt Nan and Mr. Hunter. That is, if there's no more business," she added, looking toward the president.

The president declared the meeting adjourned, and they started homeward. By a large spruce they stopped for a moment. The ground beneath the tree was a garden, glad with blossoming flowers. Virginia's gray eyes looked at them, then sought the distant mountains.

"I never thought," she said softly, "that I'd love to come up here the way I do. Of course I know Jim isn't here. He's gone on to make others happy

Somewhere Else. But I like to remember how we used to climb up here and look off at the country. He always loved it so. I used to be so lonely without him, but now I'm glad—glad he's having all the wonderful things that just must happen after we—go on! That's why I like William's flowers so! They're so glad, too!"

"I like William for taking such good care of them," said Mary. "I saw him coming up here yesterday with his garden tools."

"William!" cried Virginia gladly. "Why, William's *always* been next best to Jim!"

CHAPTER XI

"EVER VIGILANT"

"THERE'S no reason in the world why more than three of us should go back," said Virginia. "I know just exactly where she left it. It's on the table just back of the jars of raspberries. All right, Vivian, if you insist and are sure you're not too tired. It's all of six miles there and back, you know. It's not a bit necessary, Carver, but we'd love to have you come if you want to. Sagebrush Point, Don—at the open place? All right, we'll be there."

"Be sure to make the Canyon Path before dusk," warned Donald. "It's bad there, you know. Signals all right? Better take my revolver. Malcolm has his."

Virginia examined the revolver before securing the holster to her saddle.

"Two, if we need you; three, if everything's all right. You probably won't hear either. We'll see you by six o'clock. Good luck!"

She turned Pedro, and, followed by Carver and Vivian, rode back up the trail, while the others kept on down the mountain side toward Sagebrush Point where they were to meet Malcolm and Aunt Nan.

They had ridden far up Bear Canyon, miles beyond the farthest bear-trap, to the Forest Ranger's cabin. The trail was wilder than six of them had ever imagined a trail could be. Sometimes it was almost obliterated, but the blaze of the rangers with its U.S. brand told them that human beings had traversed it, and that they might safely follow. At noon they had reached the cabin—a lonely eyrie looking down into the gorge of the river. Behind it unbroken forests stretched for miles.

The ranger was away upon his beat, but his door stood hospitably open, and they had gladly entered, sure that a welcome was intended. In his little kitchen they had eaten dinner, leaving some of their bacon as a gift. Then an idea had seized Aunt Nan. Why not pick some of the raspberries which grew in profusion near by, and cook a quart of them as winter preserves for the ranger? It did not take

very long for nine pair of hands to pick three quarts instead of one, and within an hour, sugar having been found in the pantry, the berries were cooking on the little stove. Jars, too, were discovered, and at three o'clock when the boys had brought the horses, five cooks in khaki surveyed their gift with proud eyes. They had ridden hurriedly away, realizing that they were already late if they wanted Sagebrush Point for a camping-place; and three miles below the cabin Vivian had discovered the loss of her wrist-watch, a birthday gift from her father.

"Don't you worry a bit, Vivian," Virginia said, reassuringly, as she urged Pedro up the steep trail. "We'd just as soon ride back as not, and I wouldn't have you lose the watch for the world. Of course the ranger would keep it safe for us, but there's no knowing when we could get away up here again. It's best to go now when we're only three miles away."

"I'm dead sure it's right on the table," said Carver. "I saw you put it there, Vivian, when you got ready to wash the dishes."

Carver Standish was right. The watch was on the table where she had left it. The cabin seemed more lonely than ever as they hurried away. The rush of the river hundreds of feet below, the drowsy hum of the August insects, and the sound of their horses' feet upon the stones alone broke the silence. Vivian shivered.

"I hate it here, now," she said. "Let's hurry back to the others."

But it was impossible to hurry down the steep, rocky trail. The horses were tired, and a misstep or a stumble would be dangerous. Pedro, sure of himself on any trail, led the way, and Vivian and Carver followed, weaving right and left down the mountain side. More than once Carver glanced apprehensively at his watch. It was growing late—nearly five already!—and Virginia had told Donald they would be at Sagebrush Point at six! It was impossible. They could never make it!

Vivian was worried, too. She hated the shadows that began to creep in among the trees, the lonely call of a bird in the timber, the coolness that came as the afternoon waned. She shivered again, when

at the first ford, where they had separated more than an hour before, the rawhide thongs in one of her stirrups broke, and caused a second delay.

Carver's none too agile fingers laced and re-tied the thong. Virginia allowed Pedro to nibble at the quaking-asps and tried to be patient while she watched the repairing. More than once she was tempted to jump from her saddle and do the work herself, but she knew that Carver would resent the intrusion. Carver Standish III heartily disliked any intimation that he was a tenderfoot. Safe and satisfied in the citadel of New England birth and ancestry, he still was averse to any suggestion of inferiority in Wyoming. Virginia liked Carver, though she knew him far better now than she had ever dreamed she should. She liked him in spite of the tinge of snobbishness which would creep in now and then, try as he did to conceal it. She even liked him during the ten minutes he took to lace the thong when she could have done it in three.

It was growing dark when they at last swung into the easier, grass-grown trail of the lower mountains—dark and cold. The realization that they were

already two miles from supper and the others, together with the knowledge that there was still the Canyon Path to cross, made them all silent and very grave. They hurried their horses through the last of the tallest timber and out upon the bare summit of a mountain, which looked down across the valley and the river to a point beyond. As they gazed, flames shot up from the point where a newly-kindled fire was welcoming the first star. Dark specks were visible about the fire—persons moving here and there. Sagebrush Point—a mile across the valley, two by the trail!

Carver looked questioningly at Virginia, and found his answer in the smile she gravely gave him. They would go no farther. Carver knew it before Virginia discovered the paper. Vivian suspected, but would not know. They sat quietly in their saddles while she rode Pedro close to a great pine which bore a ranger's sign, burned in a piece of wood.

"Two miles to Sagebrush Point," read the sign.

"A good camping-place. Dangerous trailing!"

Below the sign was a folded piece of paper, fas-

tened by Donald's scarf-pin to the tree, and bearing Virginia's name. She read it silently and with difficulty in the fast-fading light.

"It's just as I thought," she explained. "When Donald reached here and saw what a long time it had taken, he knew we couldn't make the Point. He says not to attempt it if it's after six, and it's a quarter of seven now. I wouldn't try the Canyon Path for anything in this light, and there's no other way to go. We'll just have to camp here, that's all! We've our blankets and matches and plenty of bacon and bread, and there's a spring near by. It won't be so bad. Quite an adventure!"

Her last words were spoken in an attempt to reassure Vivian, who was staring at her—the epitome of horror.

"Camp—here—Virginia! Alone! Here! In—this—wilderness!" Vivian was monosyllabic from terror.

Carver did not share Vivian's fear, but he was a trifle overbearing in his judgment of those about the fire at Sagebrush Point.

"If Donald thought we weren't going to make it,

why didn't he camp here himself?" he asked. "Of course it's all right for me, but it's rather tough on you and Vivian. I should think he'd have thought of that."

Virginia was quick to champion Donald. Indeed Carver Standish III would have given much for the place Donald held in Virginia's estimation.

"Why, Carver," she said, frank in her displeasure, "Donald's one of the most thoughtful persons in the world. Malcolm and Aunt Nan were over at Sagebrush, and he couldn't get word to them before dark. Besides, he knows I'm not afraid to camp by ourselves. They're right across on Sagebrush, and there's nothing in this world to harm us. Of course he wouldn't have gone on for anything if you hadn't been here, but he knew he could depend on you."

The knowledge of New England ancestry could not keep Carver Standish from feeling small as he unsaddled the horses, and tied them in among the trees. Then, considering work a good antidote, he cut brush and brought dry sticks for a fire. A dead cedar promised logs enough for the night, and these



“ THEN FIVE IN QUICK SUCCESSION CAME FROM VIRGINIA’S
REVOLVER ”

Carver cut, trimmed, and piled. Vivian, unable as yet to comprehend the situation, stood looking off toward the fire on the point, and wished with all her heart that she had wings. Virginia unstrapped the blankets and laid them upon a fallen log. Then, the big revolver in her hand, she waited only for the fire to give those watching on Sagebrush the signals agreed upon. At last the flame-colored smoke burst into tongues of fire, leaping, crackling tongues which told the anxious watchers on Sagebrush that the note had been found and that all was well. A moment later three shots from the mountain opposite tore away the stillness. Donald sent back an answering three. Then five in quick succession came from Virginia's revolver.

"It's the old signal we've always used in hunting," Donald explained to Mary, Priscilla, and Jack who were standing beside him. "It means, 'We're going to camp here.' I knew Virginia would decide on that. She always does the sensible thing anyway," he added proudly.

Malcolm and Aunt Nan, standing near the wa-

ter's edge, watched the flames of Virginia's fire as they blazed skyward.

"I've never quite realized before what Virginia's made of," said Aunt Nan thoughtfully. "If her Grandmother Webster were here this minute, I think perhaps she'd realize that there *are* qualities which balance being born in New England."

"Perhaps," returned Malcolm, a little doubtfully. "Perhaps she would. I've known New Englanders to realize several things. The trouble is they're very much averse to admitting it."

Meanwhile the three on the summit across the valley had dined, frugally to be sure, and somewhat silently on bread and bacon. Now sweater-clad they sat before the fire, and munched at some sweet chocolate which Carver had discovered in his coat pocket. With every nibble Vivian peered among the trees behind her, glanced fearfully right and left, and ended by gazing with longing eyes at the fire on Sagebrush Point. Carver hugged his knees, and rocked idly to and fro. Virginia gazed thoughtfully into the flames. To her a night in a mountain forest was a privilege, whether three

or nine shared its glories. To be sure, a tent would be a distinct addition, but since they had none they must do without it. Its absence was but an incident, and gave her little anxiety—far less, in fact, than the fear which she detected in the blue eyes of Vivian. For to Vivian the approaching night was a terrible ordeal through which she must go. Her reason fled away to parts unknown, and only imagination remained to create a mountain lion in every thicket, and mysterious, unearthly, disembodied presences in the air, behind her back, at her very elbow. She was grateful when Carver came to sit beside her. With Virginia on the other side, two less avenues of approach were opened. At all events she would not talk about her fear; and, acting upon her resolve, she did her best to join in the conversation on school and books and athletics.

Ten o'clock came, and Carver brought wood for the fire. Then he unrolled their blankets, spreading them over pine boughs already cut and placed upon the ground. The ground itself was a good enough mattress for him, he said, as he

rolled in his blanket Indian-fashion, and lay down under a great pine. They need have no anxiety as to the fire. He probably should sleep but little, and would replenish it whenever wood was needed. If they wanted a thing or became frightened in the night, they should speak to him.

Vivian, sleepy in spite of her fears, lay down upon the boughs, her head in Virginia's lap. She knew she should not close her eyes, but she might as well rest. If a bear or a mountain lion came, it would make little difference whether she were sitting or reclining. Virginia was not sleepy. She preferred to sit up.

In half an hour a long, resigned snore from the neighborhood of the great pine proved that Carver Standish had forgotten all about fires and protection. Virginia smiled to herself as she reached for more wood. There was bacon in camp and undoubtedly bears on the mountain. The combination made a big fire desirable. Moreover, she was determined that the Sagebrush Point fire, replenished from time to time by a black dot, should not eclipse her own.

"Sit up a minute, Vivian," she whispered, trying to rise. "I want to get one of those big logs which I can't reach from here. I'll be back in a moment."

But when she returned with the log, Vivian's head had dropped upon the blankets, and the flames which leaped up a moment later showed her, to Virginia's joy, to be fast asleep.

So the founder of the Vigilantes was the only one left to guard the fortunes of the camp. She took her station near the edge of the slope, a little distance from the fire, drew her blanket close around her, and began her vigil. There was so much to see and to think about! She was glad she felt wide-awake.

Deep in the gorge below her, the river called with a thousand voices. Down in the valley the pine trees reared their heads—little spear points pricking the purple blackness of the night. The fire on Sagebrush sparkled like a single jewel in a vast setting. Far above and beyond the valley rose the opposite height, dark and indistinct—a bridge between two worlds. To Virginia she was like an eagle, secure

in his nest on the topmost pinnacle of a cliff, and looking forth upon his domain.

Now she turned her face upward toward the deep, almost transparent blue of the midnight sky. It was set with myriads of stars—great arc-lights, beacons at sea, flickering candle-flames. A star fell—it was one of the beacons—and came earthward, trailing glory in its wake. Then, the path blazed, another followed, and a third. The last was a little candle-flame, almost too tiny to find its way alone. The Milky Way was a great, golden trail across the sky. If souls traversed it on their way to the Great Throne, as she had believed when she was a little girl, they would have no difficulty to-night in finding their way. She traced its triumphant course across the heavens. It seemed to begin on earth, she thought to herself, and come back to earth again after its journey skyward. That might break in pieces her childhood dream. But perhaps there were Great Thrones on earth, too, if one only searched far enough. Who knew that there were not?

After all, Life was a search. She was beginning to realize that more every day. It meant a

seeking after the best things. What were those best things, she wondered? Had she discovered the trail which, like the Milky Way, led to them? Friendship was one, she concluded—the real friendship which never demanded more than it was willing to give. And Service was another—the desire to help people over the hard, rocky places—to be a comrade, not just a spectator. Dorothy had discovered that. Then the Love of Beautiful Things must surely be a third—the love of books and pictures and of all the wonderful treasures of the out-of-doors. These were not all. There were others to be found far ahead, Virginia knew—treasures more wonderful than any yet discovered—if one searched and were worthy of finding them.

At least she knew she had discovered the key which would open the gate to the trail. She felt of it upon her waist. To be "Ever Vigilant" would open the door. To be watchful of one's opportunities; never to scorn a chance to serve; to guard against the cheap and the unlovely in books and thoughts; to keep the windows of one's soul shining and clean, so that the light of all things beau-

tiful might shine in. She held the little pin close in her hand. She and Priscilla and Dorothy and Mary and Vivian would keep to the trail together.

Life was such a great, big thing she said to herself. Her breath sobbed in her throat at the thought. It was like a day in April—cloudy and sunny and wind-blown and rainy. She wanted her own life to be like that. Then she could understand the storms and clouds in other lives, and prove she was a comrade and not just an on-looker!

The fire died down and she went for more wood. As she placed a big log on the glowing embers and turned away from the heat as it burst into flame, she saw that the fire on Sagebrush was rekindled also. She could discern a shadowy shape in the light of it. Donald, perhaps. He loved the night, too. She had forgotten Donald for the moment when she chose her comrades for the Long Trail, but he must go. She had followed trails with Donald all her life, and on this great journey she needed his comradeship more than ever.

It was one o'clock, her little watch said—time to sleep. The great log with another added would last till morning. She rolled the second against the first, and lay down beside Vivian. The heat from the fire made her drowsy, and she soon slept. The flames leaped against the darkness; Pedro awakened and neighed questioningly; another star fell from the sky. Carver, Virginia, and Vivian were all in lands of their own. All at once a hideous yell shattered the night silence. It shrieked and quavered and moaned, and at last died away in an echo that encircled the valley. Virginia, mounting a rocky hill with Donald, sat up suddenly. A figure enshrouded in blankets stood beside her. Vivian mercifully slept on.

"Gee!" screamed the half-asleep and wholly frightened Carver Standish III. "What was that?"

"A mountain lion," said Virginia, shaking in spite of herself. "But he's miles away across the valley. I'm glad Vivian didn't wake up. She'd have been scared to death."

"I shouldn't blame her!" replied Carver in a stentorian whisper. "I never heard anything like it

178 Virginia of Elk Creek Valley

in my life. My! I'm sleepy! It's most eleven, isn't it?"

Virginia smiled into the darkness. Not for worlds would she have told Carver of his unsuccessful vigil.

"Yes, Carver," she said. "It's—it's past eleven!"

Alone she watched the day come as she had watched it go. She saw the last stars fade away, and the half-light of early morning greet the eastern mountains. She felt in a strange silence the mystery and majesty of dawn. A mourning dove in a faraway thicket said farewell to the night; an early morning wind stirred the quaking-asps; an orange and yellow bird left his nest and mate to fly across the valley toward a sky-line of his own hue. The trees stood expectant. Then the light came in long, golden rays. It was day.

By six they were on their way to breakfast with their fellow-campers at Sagebrush—Vivian, incredulous that the night was really over and that she had slept; Carver, secretly much disturbed over his protecting powers; Virginia, eager, radiant, buoy-

ant. Donald waited for them on the other side of the Canyon Path, and watched their safe transit. Aunt Nan and the others were ready at the camp with welcomes and words of genuine admiration.

"I'd have been worried to death about you," said Priscilla with her arm around Virginia, "if it hadn't been for Carver's being there. Yes, I would, Virginia. I don't care how much you know about camping. A man's being around makes a heap of difference. You know it does!"

"Of course," agreed the loyal Virginia.

But Carver Standish III drank his coffee in silence, glad for once that the cup was large enough to hide his face.

CHAPTER XII

THE ROMAN EMPEROR

THE late August days came relentlessly on, each in turn being seized by the Vigilantes and placed in a treasure-house of never-to-be-forgotten joys. The month which they had planned in June was lengthening into six weeks. Mr. Hunter and Virginia had insisted and Aunt Nan seemed very loath to go. Already they were quite Westernized. They "rustled" and "cached" and "packed" things without even stopping to think, and *r's* were unmistakably creeping into Priscilla's strictly Bostonian speech. What *would* the Winthrop family say?

Every day the country grew lovelier. A veil of bronze and purple was being laid softly over the foot-hills, and the waiting wheat stood golden. Day after day the sun rose in glory, and after a cloudless journey set in a golden sea. In the woods the berries of the kinnikinnick grew red, and on the

lawn the mountain ash trees stood clothed in holiday attire. The air was clear and bracing; the nights were cold. One morning the highest mountain was white with snow, which, when the sun rose higher, hurried away, as though it had told a secret. September was on the way, and these were her forerunners.

"I never supposed," announced Priscilla one morning at breakfast, "that weeks could go so fast. It makes old age seem awfully close. And still I know how slowly they go sometimes, like January at St. Helen's, for instance. Just sixteen more days, and we'll be going back East, Virginia. Dad says if I'm not back by the tenth, they'll motor to the White Mountains without me. I'm afraid I can't help feeling superior when I view the White Mountains after seeing these!"

Virginia was busily counting on her fingers.

"I'm trying to remember just what we've done and what we haven't done," she said. "Then we can see what's left. We've ridden hundreds of miles, and we've climbed mountains, and trapped a bear, and shot gophers, and fished, and homesteaded, and

camped, and visited Aunt Deborah and Jean MacDonald. I'm so glad Jean went to Aunt Deborah's with us. It was such fun having her along. Then we've been up to Mystic Lake, and out on the range with Joe and William, and——"

"But you haven't visited the Roman Emperor," interrupted her father. "I stopped at his place yesterday on my way home from Willow Creek, and found him at home, flag out and all. He promised me some water-cress, but I couldn't wait for it. You see," he added, smiling at the puzzled faces around him, "it isn't every one who can see the Emperor. It takes a special errand. In this case, it's water-cress."

"We'll go this very day!" cried Virginia. "Cottonwood Canyon can wait! Don and I've been planning it all along, but he said Mr.—the Emperor, I mean—was away up in the mountains. I'll telephone over for the boys this minute."

Not to question had become a Vigilante principle; and not to appear too curious, another. Still the mystery which filled their minds concerning the Emperor was ill-concealed. They knew Patrick

Sheehan, the old Vigilante, who lived on the Lone Mountain trail, and queer Aunt Susan Nevitt, who was reputed to have a bag of gold nuggets in the cellar of her tumble-down cabin. But of this personage, the Roman Emperor, they had surely never heard! Curiosity lent haste to their fingers, and in half an hour they were ready to start.

"His ca—*estate* is off the road to Willow Creek," Virginia explained as they went out to greet the boys. "We've ridden by the driveway loads of times, but I knew he wasn't at home by his flag not being out. That's the sign. It's that way in England, you know, at the king's and dukes' palaces. When they're at home, the flag is flying."

"I see," said Priscilla, as she mounted Cyclone. "Is the Emperor old?"

"Rather. He's nearly eighty. You see, he's been reigning twenty-five years, hasn't he, Don?"

"Yes, he commenced when Malcolm was of no account—twenty-five years or so ago. He's met with lots of reverses, too. He was telling me just before you got home how the Senate wouldn't vote him any money to fix up the estate. He'll probably

apologize. Everybody ready? Come on!" commanded Don.

They rode for a mile across the open prairie, then turned south into the Willow Creek road, which followed the foot-hills. Conversation regarding the Emperor was tantalizing, and questioning was forbidden. Accordingly, they pocketed their curiosity, and devoted their time to one another, and to the signs of approaching autumn upon the brown hillsides. Pedro and MacDuff, eager for a gallop, left the other horses, and dashed along a three-path, grass-grown trail which encircled the hill and met the road again a mile beyond.

"It's just the chance I wanted," said Donald, reining in MacDuff to ride beside Virginia. "I want to ask you about Carver. I can't make him out lately. I don't know what's the matter. He's been queer ever since that night on the mountain—last Tuesday, wasn't it? Of course he's all right to the folks, and all that, but he's stuck by himself more or less, and seemed stirred up over something. Dave, the man we got last winter, complained to Dad yesterday about Carver's being rather officious

with the men. Dad smoothed it over, of course, and explained how Carver didn't understand that that sort of thing doesn't go out here. But it kind of worries me. Everything went all right up there, didn't it, Virginia—on the mountain, I mean?"

Not even Donald could detect hesitation in Virginia's reply. If Carver still chose to keep the ill-gotten rôle of protector, it was not up to her to take it from him.

"Why, of course, Don," she said promptly. "Everything was perfectly all right. I guess Carver wasn't awfully pleased at first when he found we had to stay. You see, he—he hasn't much patience with Vivian when she's nervous. But she did splendidly, and tried her best not to show how she felt inside. And I couldn't see why Carver didn't enjoy himself. He certainly seemed to!"

Donald was plainly puzzled.

"Well," he said, "it gets me! He's not a fellow you can reach very easily either. If it were Jack, I'd ask him just what the matter was, but somehow it's different with Carver. There's always some-

thing in the way. I believe it's—too much New England!"

Virginia laughed.

"Too much of it's a dreadful barrier," she observed. "Grandmother Webster had too much when I first went to Vermont, but I found a little path that led around it after I'd searched a long time. I think part of the trouble with Carver is that he's just one of us out here. He isn't looked up to the way he is at home. Priscilla knew him last summer, you know, and she's told me about him. We were talking about it just last night, because we've noticed he's queer lately. Priscilla says he's always been looked up to by boys and girls of his age because his family's so old, and his father so wealthy, and his grandfather a colonel. In New England, you know, those things count, especially the family and the colonel. Then, besides, Carver's bright and fine-looking and an only son. Out here, you see, Don, we don't care so much about colonels and old families and money. They're all right, of course, if you have them, but you've an equal chance if you don't."

"Maybe Carver's learning that we're right after all," said Donald thoughtfully. "Maybe he's seeing that ancestry won't make a man. It's hard to admit those things, I know that. I hated to admit that the Eastern fellows at school had better manners than we cow-punchers from this part of the country. But 'twas so all the same."

Virginia allowed Pedro to nibble at the quaking-asps before she spoke.

"He'll come out all right, Don," she said. "Don't let's worry! Sometimes I think he's like Captain Myles in the poem. Priscilla does, too. He gets angry all at once, and then hates himself for it. By and by he'll be all right again, and as nice as ever the Captain was at John Alden's wedding. Come on, let's round the hill! We're nearly at Mr. Livy's, and they'll think we're too exclusive for worlds!"

The Emperor's flag was out—a diminutive and tattered Old Glory, whose shreds fluttered in the wind. It was tacked to a wooden box, which, mounted on a log at the entrance to a narrow,

winding path, served as the Emperor's mail-box.
The name

A. C. Levinsky

was painted upon the side facing the road. As they turned into the path, Priscilla halted Cyclone. There was a decided tinge of stubbornness in her voice as she spoke.

"I'm not going another step," she announced, "until I know about this Emperor business. I'm not going to embarrass any poor old thing who may live in this wilderness by not knowing anything about him. Come, Donald! You've got to tell!"

"I intended to all along just as soon as we reached the bridge," said Donald. "I know the Emperor, and I wouldn't have him hurt for anything. His real name is Augustus Cæsar Levinsky—at least, his last name is Levinsky, and I guess he hitched on the first. He's a poor old prospector who's been in this valley fifty years. He claims he was the very first to come, and perhaps he was. He's dug holes all over these mountains looking for gold, and you're always coming on him panning out gravel

in some creek. Some one grub-stakes him up here to get his land. By that, I mean," he added, noting the puzzled faces of his listeners, "that some one gives him food and clothes and a promise to bury him for the sake of the land he's homesteaded. That's the way with old Pat Sheehan, and a lot of fellows around here."

"And now he thinks he's the Emperor of Rome," said Virginia, continuing the Emperor's story. "He's been thinking that for twenty-five years, Father says. Some one gave him an old Roman History years ago, and he knows it all by heart. We all call him Mr. Livy around here. He says he doesn't feel like asking his friends to title him. He sounds pathetic, but he isn't at all. He's the happiest man you ever saw. He's like the verse at the beginning of Emerson's *Essay on History*. He believes he's Cæsar, and so he is. You'll be surprised at the way he speaks, and the fine manners he has. It's believing he's the Emperor that's done those things, I'm sure."

Less curious but more interested, they followed the cool, shady path that led toward the imperial

estates. They crossed a bridge over a creek, green with fresh water-cress, their open sesame. Upon the railing was tacked a second flag—this one new and untorn.

“The Emperor must have had a present,” observed Virginia. “You catch your first glimpse of the palace around this curve.”

Around the curve they went, and into an open, path-cut field through which the creek meandered. The palace lay in the farthest corner. It did not even stand. Its old logs, disjoined and askew, were all but on the ground. How the roof managed to hold the chimney was a mystery. Perhaps, after all, it was the chimney which acted as a prop to the roof. A lean-to of poles, sod, and bark served as an entrance, and boasted a door. Mountain-fringe and other vines had taken root in the sod, and were undoubtedly helping to hold the structure together.

An undisturbed, unbroken silence reigned over the imperial residence. The Emperor was doubtless busy with affairs of state, if indeed he were not away upon official business. Still the flag dis-

proved his absence. He might be simply viewing the domain.

Suddenly from the lean-to came such fierce barking that more than one Vigilante made a hasty return to the safety of her saddle. Then the door opened, and, preceded by his dogs, the Emperor came out into the sunshine. He had doubtless been too absorbed to note their coming.

"Down, Nero! Down, Trajan!" they heard him say. "Is this the way you receive my guests?"

The dogs ceased barking, and stood on either side of him as he surveyed his visitors. They in turn surveyed him. They saw a tall, slight old man, still unbent. It seemed as though dignity defied time and kept him upright. His frayed white shirt was spotless, and his gray trousers, held up by thongs of skin, were neatly darned and clean. The lines in his smoothly shaven face vied in intricacy with the streets of Boston; his thin hair was neatly brushed; his faded blue eyes were gentle. He was the kind of an old man to whom one instinctively showed deference. Moreover, he was the Roman Emperor.

The hats of Jack, Carver, and Donald came off as they greeted him.

"These are our friends, Mr. Livy," Donald explained. "You remember I told you some time ago that they were coming. And you know Virginia Hunter?"

Mr. Livy did know Virginia. He and Nero and Trajan came forward all together to greet her.

"It's good to see your face again, Miss Virginia," said the Emperor. "Your father was here day before yesterday. He mentioned water-cress. Was that your errand?"

"That, and to see you, Mr. Livy," answered Virginia. "My friends wished to come. I hope you're not too busy to show them around a little."

The Emperor was not too busy. He said this with a bow, which was many times repeated as he was presented to the others.

"I regard you as friends," he said with dignity, "otherwise I should hesitate to show you the palace. There is a sad lack of funds of late—a sad lack! All the Senate's appropriations are being expended on the new aqueduct, and on new roads

through the provinces. The roads hold our great possessions together, and the Emperor's home can wait. But next year all will be different. Then I shall again plead my case, and money will be forthcoming. This way, please, young ladies and gentlemen. We will first view the grounds."

His guests in respectful silence followed him down a path toward the creek over which he had placed a little foot-bridge. A fish jumped as they stepped upon the logs, and swam away to the safe shelter of the water-cress.

"The stream is well-stocked with the best of trout," explained their host. "It is my pastime to catch them in other streams and to bring them here. You remember Horace upon his Sabine farm? Such pleasures as he enjoyed are mine. Yes, there is an abundance of cress. We will wait until later to gather it that it may be fresh and crisp."

They followed the stream in its meandering course through the fields. Their guide pointed out to them this and that beauty—the fringed gentians in a thicket near the water's edge; a late wild rose which saw its pink reflection in the still, amber wa-

ter. It was as though he, aided by the Senate's money, had laid out the grounds himself, such was his pride in them. Another foot-bridge brought them back to the other side, and to the field-path which led to the house.

The Emperor felt called upon to apologize again before opening the door of the lean-to.

"The Senate still appropriates for conquests," he said gravely. "I am much opposed. The Empire is large enough."

They went within. The lean-to was a chaotic place, filled to overflowing with pick-axes, spades, elk-horns, musk-rat traps, mining tools, samples of coal, and curiously-colored pieces of rock. Some skins, stretched on boards, were drying on the wall; some rude fishing-rods stood in one corner. The little room was strangely like the Emperor's poor, befuddled brain.

The room in the main house was hardly imperial. A small, rickety stove, bearing corn-meal porridge in a tin basin, stood in the center. In one corner was the Emperor's bed, piled high with skins; in another, a scarred and battered table. Some ragged

articles of clothing hung about the room. By the one window was his chair, and on the floor close by lay a soiled and tattered book—Smith's *History of Ancient Rome*! The Emperor picked it up eagerly and showed it to his guests.

"I was reading over again all that my reign has accomplished when you came," he said. "There are the fire department, and the police, and the new roads, and the patronage of poets. I feel encouraged when I think it all over."

"I should think you would," complimented Virginia. "And then think of all the things you did before you were Emperor! Think of the early days out here—the Vigilantes and all!"

Mr. Livy's faded blue eyes gleamed. Epochs had become as nothing to him. Now he was Emperor of Rome, and then he had fought against robbers and road-agents in a new country. It was all one.

"Don't I remember it!" he cried. "Don't I remember how we hung seven robbers in one night from a single cottonwood! Don't I remember how old Jim Gillis said to me: 'For God's sake, Levinsky,

get me one last drink before I die!' I got it for him, and in a minute more he was dead!"

Jack and Carver's eyes shone. They thought old tales were forthcoming, but they did not know the Emperor. He said no more of Vigilante days, but turned toward the stove to stir the porridge.

"I'll get the water-cress for you directly," he said with a return to his old dignity. "Give it to your father with my compliments, Miss Virginia. I sent some but recently to the censor. No payment, I insist!"

Thus dismissed, his guests passed reluctantly outside. Ten minutes later they were making their farewells. The Emperor stood between Nero and Trajan, and watched them go. He was glad of occasional visitors, but more glad to return to the knotty problems which were before the Empire.

"Good-by," he called as they rode away. "Don't forget to notice the statue of Athena just within the gate. It's a recent gift from the Governor of Gaul."

Then he went within the palace, passed through the lofty atrium, and entered his private room,

where he sat down to continue the story of his glorious reign.

Meanwhile his guests searched for the Athena. There might be something—a post, perhaps—that signified the goddess of wisdom to the plastic mind of poor Mr. Levinsky. But they could find nothing.

“She’s only a dream like all the other things,” said Priscilla. “Poor man! I can’t see how he can reconcile things in his own mind!”

“He doesn’t,” explained Virginia. “That’s the lovely part of it! He’s the happiest Emperor I’ve ever known of in all my life!”

CHAPTER XIII

ON THE MESA

"PEDRO," said Virginia, "do you realize for one little minute what's happened?"

Pedro looked back and whinnied. He realized at least that something was agitating his mistress. But half an hour since she had run out of the house to where he was feeding beneath the cottonwoods, and hurried him to the corral where she had saddled and bridled him herself. She had been crying then. Quick little sobs were shaking her shoulders. Then she had sprung upon his back and ridden like mad across the prairie to Elk Creek Valley. Had MacDuff been along, he would not have minded; but it was too warm at mid-day to gallop all alone. Once during that wild ride she had laughed, and once she had leaned forward and put her arms around his neck. It was all a very strange proceeding. Now she had mercifully halted

him on the brow of the mesa, and was allowing him to rest and feed while she sat in silence and looked across the sagebrush stretches to the mountains.

A long silence. The air throbbed with a hidden insect chorus. Little waves of heat shimmered above the mesa. Jean MacDonald's three cows, searching for better feeding-grounds, passed by and gazed with grave, inquisitive eyes at Pedro and Virginia. Pedro fed on where he was. At last the girl upon his back spoke again.

"Pedro," she began, and again Pedro raised his head, "Pedro, I've decided that Life isn't such a strange thing after all! I've always thought it was until to-day, but I guess it isn't. I guess it just means loving people—and things! If you love the wrong kind of people and the things that don't count, why, then—why, then Life's a sad, gray thing. But if you love the right kind of people, the kind who've learned that a primrose isn't just a primrose, and things like the mountain and the mesa and *you*, Pedro—why, then, Life's a golden thing like to-day. And it's the loving that makes all the

difference. I discovered that this morning when Aunt Nan told me about Malcolm. When I was in Vermont I thought that Grandmother and Aunt Nan were about the happiest people I'd seen; but this morning, when I saw the light in Aunt Nan's eyes, I understood. I guess it's a home that makes all the difference, Pedro—a home you and *somebody else* make together!"

Pedro fed on, glad to be talked to, confident that his mistress' world had righted itself again. A passing cloud obscured the sun for a brief moment.

"That's the way it was with me this morning," confided Virginia. "For just an instant I felt sorry. 'Twas the selfish part of me coming out. I didn't want any one to take a bigger piece of Aunt Nan's heart than mine. I didn't want to move over and make room for any one else—even Malcolm. But that mean, drab feeling lasted only a moment. It went right away, and now I'm glad, *glad—glad!* If Grandmother Webster's only glad, too, there couldn't be any greater happiness in the world, could there, Pedro?"

Pedro stopped feeding to look back at his mis-

tress, and to shake his head. Virginia laughed.

"You're the only friend I want to-day, Pedro," she said, her arms around his neck, "you and a big Something in my heart. I wanted to come away off up here alone with you. That's why I hurried you so, poor dear! I wanted to hear the stillness all around, and to look at the mountains. I wanted to think about *it*, and to wonder if, some day, after I've learned more things, it will come to me, too!"

Impulsively she turned in her saddle and looked down the foot-hills. Some one was fording the creek. She knew it even before she heard the splash of water. As she watched, two riders left the ford, and turned north up the canyon trail. They were Malcolm and Aunt Nan. Virginia turned back toward the mountains, and sat very still.

"Pedro," she said at last, her voice breaking, "I guess perhaps we'd better go home, don't you? Aunt Nan and Malcolm have found their trail, you see. They don't need us just now. No, I'm not sorry! I'm glad! I just *know* it's the most wonderful thing in all the world!"

CHAPTER XIV

THE NEW SCHOOL-TEACHER IN BEAR CANYON

"YES, sir," said Mr. Samuel Wilson, stretching his boot-clad legs to their fullest extent, and twirling his thumbs thoughtfully, "yes, sir, we've got to have a teacher up in Bear Canyon. There ain't a bit o' use in waitin' a week for that teacher from Sheridan. Come December, there'll be snow, and school not out. Accordin' to my judgment, and I'm the chief trustee o' this district, it's best to get some one to teach a week until the one we've hired gets here. I stopped at Ben Jarvis' place on my way down here, and he agreed with me. Says he, 'Sam, there'd ought to be one out o' that crowd o' ladies over to Hunter's who could keep school a week. They're all raised around Boston, folks tell me. Now you go along over, and see.' And I said I would. What do you think, John? Ain't there a likely one among 'em? If Virginia didn't know the

children so well, I'd be for choosin' her. But a stranger's what we want. That school seems to need a stranger 'bout every term."

"That's just the difficulty," said Mr. Hunter. "It is a hard school, and these girls aren't used to schools out here. The girl I am thinking of is Mary Williams, but she's young—only eighteen. I shouldn't even consider her if she hadn't said the other day that she'd like to try teaching in that little school-house up the canyon. Of course 'twould be only for a week. They're going back East in a little more than two."

"Her age ain't nothin' against her," reassured Mr. Wilson. "Remember Eben Judd's girl who kept the school last spring? She was only seventeen, and she could thrash the biggest boy there! Supposin' you let me talk with this girl if she's around. Seems to me twenty dollars a week is mighty easy money for just keepin' school and givin' out things you've got in your head a'ready!"

Mr. Hunter, half-sorry that he had even considered the matter, went in search of Mary, while Mr. Samuel Wilson stretched his legs even farther

across the floor, re-lit his old corn-cob pipe, and settled himself more comfortably in his chair. He did not rise when Mary, forewarned but very eager, came into the room a few minutes later, but he did remove his pipe. Then he stated his errand, while Mary, feeling very professional, listened with the deference due Mr. Wilson's position as chief trustee of the Bear Canyon District.

"What we want," concluded the chief trustee, with a wave of his hand, after he had explained all the difficulties and expatiated on all the joys of the Bear Canyon school, "what we want is a teacher who can start things right. A heap depends on the startin' things have in this world, I've noticed. Now you look like a spunky young lady. Ain't afraid o' big boys, are you?"

Mary, with the memory of Eben Judd's daughter and the biggest boy fresh in her mind, hesitated. Bear Canyon might offer problems too big for her inexperienced hands. Then she summoned an extra amount of dignity.

"It surely isn't necessary to thrash them, Mr. Wilson, if you can get along with them some other

way. No, I'm not at all afraid of them. Are there many big ones?"

Mr. Wilson considered for a moment. No, there were not many. Ben Jarvis' big boy Allan was the worst, and even he wasn't bad if he had enough to do. The trouble was he led all the others, and if he once got "contrary," trouble arose. Mary inwardly resolved that he should not get "contrary."

"Now up here in Bear Canyon," Mr. Wilson further remarked, "we're strong on figurin'. How are you on arithmetic?"

Mary's heart fell. Dismal visions of cube root and compound proportion came to torment her. Her ship, sailing smoothly but a moment since, had apparently struck a reef. Then a never-failing imagination came to her rescue. She saw Priscilla solving her problems in the evening at the table.

"Arithmetic isn't exactly my specialty, Mr. Wilson," she said brightly. "That is, I don't love it as I do other studies; but I assure you I shall be quite able to teach it."

The chief trustee rose from his seat, knocked the

ashes from his pipe into the fire-place, and took his hat.

"I guess you're hired for the week, then," said he, "at twenty dollars. I'll stop in at Ben Jarvis' on my way home and tell him. School begins Monday morning at nine. I may drop in myself durin' the week to see how things is goin'. Good-mornin'."

Mary stood in the middle of the room, paying no heed to the curious voices which called her from the porch. She saw the chief trustee ride past the window on his way to tell Ben Jarvis that she was elected. She pictured the incorrigible Allan Jarvis spending the Sabbath in the invention of mischief. It had come too suddenly. She could not realize that she was actually a Wyoming school-teacher. Now the time which she had thought to be four years' distant had come—the time to begin to realize the ideals she had shaped for herself upon the teaching and the personality of her adored Miss Wallace.

The voices on the porch became more curious, and Mary, at last coming to herself, hurried out

to tell the wonderful news. She found the Vigilantes and Aunt Nan as interested as she herself, and willing to sacrifice her company for five days for the sake of Bear Canyon's rising generation. Priscilla offered all the proficiency in arithmetic she possessed; Aunt Nan hurried indoors to cut and make two aprons for the teacher; and Vivian and Virginia went in search of pencils and paper. This was Saturday and there was no time to lose.

On Monday morning at eight they all stood beneath the cottonwoods to watch a wide-eyed and much excited school-teacher start for Bear Canyon. In a bag which she hung on the saddle-horn were her pencils, papers, and new apron; in a package strapped to the saddle was her lunch, packed by Hannah's interested hands; and in her heart were excitement, misgivings, and eagerness. She preferred to go alone, she said, as she mounted into the saddle. They might ride up at four, and come home with her if they liked, but she must go alone.

They did go up that afternoon at four—Vivian, Priscilla, and Virginia. As they swung around a

bend in the road, and came upon the little school-house, they were surprised at the stillness. Where was everybody? The children had not gone home—that was certain—for half a dozen horses were picketed round about. Had the school adjourned and gone for a picnic in the woods? That would not be unlike the new teacher, but it would be very unlike the former traditions of the Bear Canyon school. No sound came from within and it was long past four. Had the big Jarvis boy triumphed after all, and made Mary a prisoner?

After five minutes of patient, puzzled waiting they added their horses to those already grazing among the sagebrush, and stole quietly to the open window. The new teacher sat in the middle of the battered, scarred, ugly little room. She held her two youngest children upon her lap much to the detriment of her new apron. A dirty eager face was raised to hers from either side of her chair. The others of her twenty charges sat as near as the seats would permit. The big Jarvis boy had not deigned to move toward the front—that was too much of a concession for the first day—but

he was leaning forward in his seat, his big, shaggy, unkempt head resting in his folded arms, his eyes never leaving Mary's face. She was telling them the story of the *Dog of Flanders*. The Vigilantes, crouching beneath the window, heard her as she finished.

"The next day," she said, "they came to the great cathedral, and found Nello and Patrasche dead upon the stone floor. People were sorry then. Alois' father was one who came. He realized how cruel he had been to Nello, and was ready now to help him. But it was too late. Little Alois came also. She begged Nello to wake and come home for the Christmas festivities, and cried when she saw that he could not. Then a great artist came. He had seen Nello's picture of the old man on the fallen tree, and he knew that some day Nello might become a wonderful painter, even though another had won the Antwerp prize. He wanted to take Nello away with him, he said, and teach him art. But he, also, was too late, for Nello and Patrasche had gone away together to a Kinder Country. All their lives they had not been separated, and so

the people of their little village, sorry and ashamed, made them one grave and laid them to rest together."

There was a silence in the Bear Canyon school-house until a little girl in a pink apron sobbed. Sobs were at a discount in Bear Canyon, and yet strangely enough no one laughed. Allan Jarvis, in the back seat, was intent upon his finger-nails. The others were gazing admiringly at their new teacher.

"It's such a sad story," said the little girl, using her pink apron for a handkerchief, "but I like it all the same."

"Deary me!" cried the new teacher, depositing the two littlest ones on the floor, "it's half-past four! We must close school at once!"

At that the big Jarvis boy left his seat and came down the aisle, for the first time in his life abstaining from pulling the hair of the girls nearest him.

"Shan't I get your horse ready for you, ma'am?" he asked.

The new teacher smiled gratefully upon him.

"If you please, Allan," she said. "I'll be ever so much obliged." And Allan Jarvis departed for the horse sheds—a conquered hero!

Mary, tired but enthusiastic, told them all about it as they rode home together, followed at a respectful distance by a dinner-pail laden throng. How she had arrived that morning to find Allan Jarvis the center of a mischief-bent circle; how she had begun the day by the most exciting shipwreck story she knew; and how the promise of another story before four o'clock had worked a miracle. They were starved for stories, she said. She thought they needed them more than arithmetic.

"Besides," she added, "probably the Sheridan person knows all about figures. I'm going to put all the arithmetic classes the last thing in the afternoon, and if we don't get around to them, why all right. It's unfortunate, of course, but it can't be helped."

One day was quite sufficient to establish the name and the fame of the Bear Canyon school-teacher. Around every supper-table circled tales of her wisdom, her beauty, her strange way of speaking, and

her general superiority over any teacher Bear Canyon had ever hired. Her ability to tell stories was lauded to the skies, and her genius at making six hitherto mercilessly long hours seem like three marvelously short ones was freely advertised. History under this new teacher had become something more than a dog-eared text-book; geography more than stained and torn wall-maps; reading more than a torturesome process of making sounds. They proudly told their parents what the Constitution of the United States had looked like when their teacher had last seen it; the size and shape of Plymouth Rock as recorded by her during her last visit there. They re-told her stories one by one to the children at home, too young for school. Allan Jarvis did his part. He told his father he would go to school without a word, if the new teacher could be persuaded to stay in Bear Canyon.

Because of this Mr. Benjamin Jarvis left his work the third day, put on a clean shirt, and visited the school himself. Mr. Samuel Wilson joined him, as did the third trustee from farther up the canyon. When these three gentlemen entered, the old-

est History class was engaged in reproducing the trial of Nathan Hale, the leading man in the cast being the big Jarvis boy. It was a novel method of teaching history, the trustees said to themselves, remembering the barren instruction they had received, but it seemed effectual. That night they offered the new teacher a permanent job in Bear Canyon. The teacher in Sheridan was not over-anxious to come, they said, and the position was Mary's if she cared to accept it.

But Mary was going to college, she explained to the disappointed trustees. Perhaps, some day, she would come back—some day when she had learned more about teaching. As it was, Friday night must end her labors, grateful as she was, and happy as she felt over the reception Bear Canyon had given her.

It came all too soon—Friday night. The children stood in a disconsolate little group to bid her good-by. They knew Bear Canyon teachers of old. There would be no more stories, no more circuses at recess, no more flower hunts in the woods, no more plays. School now would become just a weary

succession of days—all pointing toward Saturday. Figures would take the place of reading, and the Rhine would again be just a crooked, black line, not a river surmounted by frowning castles and golden with legends.

The little girl in the pink apron again used it as a handkerchief as Mary rode down the trail.

“I—I’d go to school all my life—with her!” she said loyally.

The school-teacher halted at the residence of Mr. Benjamin Jarvis, second trustee. He it was who was to sign the check for her services, give to her the very first money she had ever earned. He was waiting for her, the check in his hand.

“I—I think I ought to tell you, Mr. Jarvis,” said Mary, “especially since you’re strong on figures in Bear Canyon, that I haven’t taught many this week. I’m afraid I’m very weak on system. That will be one of the things I’ll have to learn in college, I guess. The days have gone so fast I just haven’t seemed to have time to get them in. And—and to tell the truth, Mr. Jarvis, I’m not very strong on figures myself.”



“ HE CAME UP TO HER, A BROWN PAPER PARCEL IN HIS
HAND ”

"Figures!" said Mr. Benjamin Jarvis as he shook hands with her. "I guess you've given that boy o' mine somethin' better'n figures, God bless you!"

The boy himself came around the house just as Mary was mounting her horse to ride away. He had left school before the others, and had said no good-by. Now he came up to her, a brown paper parcel in his hand.

"It's a rattle-snake skin I fixed for you," he said shyly. "You said you liked 'em once. And the heavy thing in the end's my jack-knife. I carved your letters on the handle. I thought it might come in handy when you went to college."

CHAPTER XV

MR. BENJAMIN JARVIS ENTERTAINS

BEAR CANYON did not forget Mary. A score of heart-broken children was proof against such oblivion. Moreover, hope began to dawn in the hearts beneath pink gingham and outing flannel when the teacher from Sheridan, discouraged perhaps by a total lack of cordiality in her students, resigned after two lugubrious days of service. Then Mr. Samuel Wilson, accompanied by Mr. Benjamin Jarvis and the third trustee rode in a body to the Hunter ranch, and offered Mary a substantial "raise" if she would only stay on until December, and finish the fall term so triumphantly begun.

The memories of the little girl in the pink apron, together with the pleas of Mr. Benjamin Jarvis on behalf of Allan, and the assurance of Mr. Samuel Wilson that his children had cried "five nights runnin' " was almost too much for Mary. In one mad

wave of sympathy she determined to give up college and to wire her mother that the Path of Duty for her led unmistakably to the Bear Canyon school. But the more mature judgment of Mr. Hunter and Aunt Nan prevailed, and an hour later three very reluctant trustees rode away, leaving behind them a sad, but much relieved, school-teacher, who lay long awake that night and pondered over the desperate state of affairs in Bear Canyon.

But her worry, like most that encumbers the world, was needless, for the County Superintendent over at Elk Creek lent a helping hand, and sent Miss Martha Bumps to Bear Canyon. Now Miss Bumps was not Mary, but she was assuredly Miss Martha Bumps, and the three trustees, disappointed as they were not to have Mary, held their heads a trifle higher as they drove to town. For the aforesaid Miss Bumps was a character of renown throughout the county, and it was only because of the whooping-cough in the consolidated rural schools of Willow Creek that she was prompted to forsake her larger field and hurry to the aid of Bear Canyon.

For twenty-five years Miss Martha Bumps had

dedicated her energies to the teaching of Wyoming country schools. Some who knew her well affirmed that she had made money thereby; and this statement will doubtless be given credence by all who are not themselves school-teachers. After relinquishing the dreams in which most women of thirty indulge, and deciding once and for all that she would give the best of her life to teaching, she had spent much thought and ingenuity in scheming how such a vocation could be a distinctly pleasurable one. Ten years of boarding in homesteaders' cabins, of sleeping with the youngest child, and eating salt pork three times a day, of drinking condensed milk on ranches devoted solely to cattle, and of riding miles to her place of business in all kinds of weather—these experiences had been fruitful in the extreme. Now she boarded nowhere. Instead, she lived in her own two-room house, which, clapboarded, shingled, windowed and doored after the manner of all houses, was mounted upon four stout cart-wheels, and driven by an obliging trustee of one district to the next chosen field whenever Miss Bumps decided that the time had come to make a change.

Arriving at her destination, the house was drawn to the best site near the school, the horses were unhitched, and the trustee, riding and leading, started homeward, leaving Miss Bumps to begin her double labors in her new situation.

Now, although this rather unusual mode of living on wheels had attracted much attention and comment, it must be conceded (and will by all country school-teachers) that it was decidedly superior to boarding. In her small but spotless kitchen, Miss Bumps cooked the food which no homesteader's cabin afforded, and at night slept luxuriously in her own comfortable bed which nearly filled her other room. All day she gave herself untiringly to her profession. In the evenings she sat by her small air-tight stove, read, and tatted!

To this last-named accomplishment Miss Bumps had dedicated fifteen years of practice until expert proficiency had made eyes unnecessary. She tatted while she read, tatted while she taught, tatted while she watched the potatoes boiling for dinner. Some even asserted that they had seen her tat on horse-

back with all the diligence attributed to Bertha, the beautiful queen of old Helvetia, who spun from a distaff fastened to the saddle of her betasseled palfrey.

But even such a curiosity as Miss Bumps may have been in the early days of her portable residence and ever-present tatting grows ordinary when besieged by Time, and Wyoming no longer regarded her as a phenomenon. She was just plain Martha Bumps, to whom many a rural community owed much. Nevertheless, it must be admitted that her singular customs of living were considered most eccentric by strangers who often laughed long and uproariously at the portable house. Three amused Vigilantes found in her the best theme material imaginable, and on the day when Mr. Crusoe reported having passed her house and her on the road from Elk Creek, they hastened with their hostess to the mail-box, ostensibly to await the postman, but really to see Miss Martha Bumps pass by.

They did not have long to wait. The Willow Creek trustee had used his best team of horses in the transportation, and Miss Bumps' entry into Bear

Canyon was a triumphal one. At a brisk trot and in a cloud of dust, the equipage came down the easy grade toward the mail-box and the four interested Vigilantes, who, throwing aside all ostentation, sprang to their feet and stared. They saw a little, blue-ginghamed woman under a huge peanut-straw hat, who sat in her own front doorway beside a substantial trustee and tatted while her interested eyes scanned her chosen country. Spying the four wayside spectators and doubtless mistaking them for members of her future flock, she smiled from behind a pair of gold-bowed spectacles, and waved a welcoming tatting-shuttle.

"She thinks I'm one of the children," said the former Bear Canyon school-mistress. "She doesn't recognize me as a professional friend. But I'm going to call upon her to-morrow if it's the last thing I do while I'm in Wyoming. Maybe, since I know the Bear Canyon school, I'll even dare give her some suggestions. I'm so anxious she should understand Allan."

But Mary's call was never made, for an hour later Mr. Benjamin Jarvis rode in to announce with an

air of mystery a barn-warming in his new building for that very evening.

"It's short notice," he explained to those who had met his invitation with instantaneous and delighted acceptance, "it's short notice, but, when you come to think of it, there ain't much time left. You ladies go back East in less than a week, and the threshers may come any day, so I says to Allan this mornin' that seein' the floor was laid we hadn't better wait to get the windows in nor any finishin' touches. It will be a farewell party from Bear Canyon to you, Miss Mary, and a welcomin' one to the new teacher. I just rode past the school-house to see how she felt about to-night before invitin' the others. She's all set up an' settled in the pine grove next the school, ain't tired a mite, and says there's nothing like a neighborhood party to get a person acquainted."

Mary repeated her appreciation as the second trustee, having announced the time of assembling and probable other guests, turned his horse's head homeward. Nor were the others slow to voice their own. Virginia was radiant. A real Wyoming barn-

warming, she told Mr. Jarvis, seemed the final joy in their collection of summer treasures, and she could not be grateful enough for his hospitality toward her guests.

Everybody for miles around would be there, she announced that evening as they hurried from supper to dress. All the people in the Canyon and the Valley, and even the forest rangers from Sagebrush Point and Cinnamon Creek. It would not be much like a Gordon dance or one at St. Helen's, but she knew they would enjoy it. Yes, she said in response to Priscilla's questions, it might really be quite like the one in *The Virginian* where they had swapped the babies.

Vivian, who had been burrowing in her closet for a stray blue satin slipper to match the gown spread upon her bed, was surprised a few moments later to see Virginia's dismayed face.

"Oh, Vivian, dear," she cried, "I thought you'd understand about dressing. You really can't wear that, you know. Why, nobody will be dressed up like that! It's for everybody, you see—Dick and Mr. Crusoe and William and the men at Keiths'.

They'll all come in flannel shirts and chaps, and they'd all feel so queer and awkward if we dressed as we would at school. A clean middy is what you want. I'm going to wear that. You see, it's so different out here, Vivian."

It certainly was different out there, Vivian said to herself a little petulantly as she hung up the blue dress, and selected a fresh middy and some lighter shoes. Would she be expected to dance with the Bear Canyon forest ranger and his brethren from Cinnamon Creek and Sagebrush Point—with Dick and William and Mr. Crusoe? They were picturesque, and she would enjoy describing them as characteristic of the West when she returned home, but as for dancing with them, that—she was careful not to admit to the others—was quite another matter.

By seven they were off, Mr. Crusoe being the proud driver of the large rig, and the other men following on horseback. The Keith family with Carver and Jack joined them at the main road, and all together they journeyed up Bear Canyon which was populated beyond its wont with pedestrians

and equestrians, all bound for the barn-warming of Mr. Benjamin Jarvis.

Virginia's prophecy was fulfilled. *Everybody was there!* Not a family in the Valley or Canyon had missed this opportunity. Babies, securely bundled against the night air, slumbered on fresh hay in the unused bins, and allowed their tired parents a few moments to greet their neighbors. Love for their old teacher, and interest in their new, divided the hearts of every child but two in the Bear Canyon school, those of the little girl in the pink apron and Allan Jarvis being immovably anchored. The rangers from Bear Canyon and Sagebrush, together with a bran-new man from Cinnamon Creek, were among the guests, and two cow boys from the great Biering ranch westward had, at the invitation of Mr. Benjamin Jarvis, driven their bunch of cattle into his corral, made camp on the nearby hillside, and stayed for the celebration.

The two guests of honor were escorted to seats on the center platform, expressly built for Mr. Samuel Wilson's phonograph, which by elevation, it was believed, would furnish sufficient volume for danc-

ing. In the few intervals between the quickly succeeding introductions, Bear Canyon's two school-mistresses began their acquaintanceship, and Mary found herself strangely fascinated by plain Miss Martha Bumps. A critical analysis failed to warrant the fascination. Certainly Miss Bumps' appearance was not engrossing. To her, clothes were an economical and a social necessity. She wore her traveling gown of faded blue gingham, which of itself was inconspicuous, had it not been for two pockets of newer material on either side of the front. These proofs of unheeded Scriptural warning, being far different in size, gave the entire garment a sinister, cross-eyed effect, which did not fail to catch the eye of the most casual observer. After a surreptitious examination of the aforesaid pockets, Mary discovered that one was occupied by Miss Bumps' ample handkerchief, and the other by her tatting.

Nor was there anything extraordinary in the features of her successor. Ordinary gray hair was parted most punctiliously upon a most ordinary forehead. Her eyes were the usual blue, and her

nose a trifle better shaped than the average. In vain Mary searched for the hiding-place of the fascination which years afterward she was to understand—that fascination which is born of noblest enthusiasm and a passion for service, and which can transform all the Valleys of Baca in the wide world.

Priscilla stood with Virginia and Donald, and with eyes full of eagerness watched the gathering of Mr. Benjamin Jarvis' guests. She longed for Miss King and Miss Wallace and Dorothy and the Blackmore Twins—yes, she even longed for her mother, in spite of her apprehension lest her Bostonian mother might not strictly appreciate this Wyoming barn-warming and the cosmopolitan society attendant thereupon. She wanted them all to feel as six weeks ago she had felt that indescribable *first* thrill at the sight of chaps and lariats and fully-equipped cow boys. She wanted them all to realize that here in Mr. Benjamin Jarvis' new barn was a true democracy of comradeship—a comradeship freed from the obnoxious fetters of ball-room etiquette.

It was the interest sparkling in her brown eyes which made the Cinnamon Creek forest ranger out-distance Carver Standish III in his haste to ask her for the grand march. Carver, in white trousers and an air a little too pronounced to be termed self-possession, was leisurely crossing the floor toward her when his chap-clad rival of Cinnamon Creek slid past him unceremoniously and reached Priscilla first. Even then Carver could not believe she would choose a forest ranger in place of him; and his anger was by no means cooled when he heard her say as though in answer to an apology:

"Oh, but you see I can dance with Carver any day, and I've never danced with a forest ranger in my life. I was just hoping you'd ask me when you came!"

Baffled, Carver sought Vivian in the corner whence he had come. Weak as Vivian was at times, he said to himself, in the matter of associates she showed better judgment than some other girls he might name. Vivian did not turn him down. Secretly she was devoutly thankful he had rescued her from a persistent Biering cow boy to

whom she had not been introduced, and with whom, had an introduction been procured, she did not care to dance. Before Carver had come, she had watched Mary talking with that freakish Miss Bumps, Priscilla chatting with a dozen different ranchmen, cow boys, and Bear Canyon children, and Virginia attending to the needs of a fretful baby while its mother went cookie-hunting to the family rig.

In her heart of hearts Vivian envied them all. Inwardly she longed to be one with whom all others felt at ease; but outwardly it was far easier to echo Carver's vindictive mood, and agree with him, as they went to take their places in the ever-lengthening line, that never in her life had she seen such people.

Mr. Samuel Wilson with Miss Bumps as a partner and Mr. Benjamin Jarvis with Mary led the march, which three times made the circle of the new barn before breaking into an hilarious two-step. Mr. Samuel Wilson's phonograph groaned and wheezed bravely from its platform; three great bon-fires outside made the great barn glow with

light; the babies in the straw-filled bins slumbered on, while their fathers and mothers grew young again.

Carver, scorning a two-step, was teaching Vivian a new dance introduced at Gordon the winter before. Pretty as it was, it was strangely inappropriate in Mr. Benjamin Jarvis' barn, and served to separate Carver and Vivian still farther from their fellow guests. The Cinnamon Creek forest ranger watched them until the straight line between his eyebrows grew deeper and deeper. Then he left Miss Martha Bumps with the excuse of bringing her a glass of cider, and started across the floor. It was too bad, he was thinking to himself, for a likeable chap like that young Standish to get in bad. A good-natured word might give him a hint, and no one be the wiser.

Carver and Vivian did not notice his approach. They were resting from their dance, and talking together in tones low yet perfectly audible to one who might be passing by.

"Did you ever see such queer people in your life?" the tall ranger heard Vivian say, and Carver's rejoinder made the straight line between his brows

even deeper than before. Apparently there was double need for his friendly hint.

"Some five hundred, *believe me!*" said the third Carver Standish.

The scorn in his voice was born of petulance rather than of snobbishness, but no such kindly discrimination would be made by any sharp-eared guest of Mr. Benjamin Jarvis, and the Cinnamon Creek forest ranger lost no time.

"If I were you," he said frankly but pleasantly to the amazed Carver Standish, "I'd be a bit more careful about what I said. You see, here in Wyoming it's not considered good form to talk about your host and his guests. If they heard you, it mightn't be comfortable. And, besides, it seems to me it would be better to dance with other folks. That's why I came to ask you if you'd dance the next dance with me, Miss Winters."

Carver and Vivian were too discomfited to be gracious. Like many persons more mature than they, they sought to cover embarrassment and to gain control of the situation by bad manners.

"I hardly think," said Carver Standish III stiffly,

"that I need any coaching on behavior from you!"

And before the ranger had time to reply, had he contemplated such action, Vivian was ready with her self-defense.

"I rather guess New Englanders have about as good manners as Wyoming people," she said scathingly, "at least judging from those I've seen!"

The reply of the Cinnamon Creek forest ranger was brief and to the point.

"I always thought so myself until to-night," he said.

Then he bowed politely, procured a glass of cider for the waiting Miss Bumps, who was tatting during the interval, and quietly took his leave. But his words, angrily received though they had been, bore fruit, for Carver Standish III danced not only with Miss Martha Bumps but also with Mrs. Samuel Wilson who was twice his size; and Vivian, heartily ashamed of herself and seeking redemption in her own eyes, accepted the Biering cow boy without a show of an introduction, and danced with him three times during the evening, not to mention her hearty acceptance of Dick and Alec and Joe.

It was late when Mr. Benjamin Jarvis' barn-warming broke up, and later when the guests rode and drove away down the canyon. In Mr. Crusoe's rig, save from one occupant, conversation and laughter never ceased until they turned down the avenue of cottonwoods. The Cinnamon Creek forest ranger came in for his share of the observations from all but Vivian—his general superiority over the other rangers, his good English, the interesting line between his eyes, and his air of having seen the world. Miss Bumps was admired and complimented. The stature of the biggest Biering cow boy brought forth exclamations. The capacity of Mr. Benjamin Jarvis as a host received loud praise. In short, no one was omitted, even to the youngest Wilson baby, who had looked so adorable as he lay asleep in the bin.

It had been a memorable evening, Aunt Nan said, as they gathered around the big fire which Hannah had kept for them, for a last half hour before bed-time. She thought they all needed just such an occasion, so that they might carry back home with them a knowledge of real Wyoming hospi-

tality which knew no strangers. Of course, they had seen it all summer long, she added, smiling at Virginia, but the courtesy of Mr. Benjamin Jarvis had made them one with all Elk Creek Valley and Bear Canyon.

"I've been thinking all the evening of the little poem we learned last Christmas, Virginia," she said. "You know, the one about the fire. I guess the big bon-fires at Mr. Jarvis' made me think of it, and now this one at home brings it back again. You remember it, don't you?"

Virginia did remember. She repeated it softly while they watched the flames and listened. Vivian, in her corner, was glad no one could see the red which crept into her cheeks.

"I watched a log in the fire-place burning,
 Wrapped in flame like a winding sheet,
Giving again with splendid largess
 The sun's long gift of treasured heat—

"Giving again in the fire's low music
 The sound of wind on an autumn night,
And the gold of many a summer sunrise
 Garnered and given out in light.

“I watched a log in the fire-place burning—

Oh, if I, too, could only be

Sure to give back the love and laughter

That Life so freely gave to me!”

“That’s what the people out here do,” said Aunt Nan after a little when Virginia had finished. “They’re not afraid to give back the ‘love and laughter’ which Life has given them. I think we reserved New Englanders can learn a lesson from Mr. Jarvis and the Cinnamon Creek forest ranger and all the other people we met and be more willing to give back what we’ve had given to us.”

For a long hour after she had gone to bed Vivian remembered the lesson she might have learned from the Cinnamon Creek forest ranger and would not; the love and laughter she might have given the guests of Mr. Benjamin Jarvis and did not. Thoroughly disgusted with herself, she lay looking through the tent opening at the mountains—great, silent souls beneath the stars. They gave back—just *everything*, she thought.

“Can’t you sleep, Vivian?” Virginia whispered

from her bed across the tent. "What's the matter?"

Vivian told half the truth.

"It's that poem," she said petulantly. "Of course it's lovely, but I can't get it out of my mind, and I hate to have things run through my head like that!"

CHAPTER XVI

THE CINNAMON CREEK FOREST RANGER

"No, Vivian," assured Virginia for at least the tenth time, "there aren't any cattle on those hills. You just turn up the Bear Canyon road where we went after the bear, and go till you reach the creek. It's only a mile from here. Then if you feel a bit nervous about riding Siwash up the mountain, why tie him to a tree and walk. Perhaps 'twill be easier anyway, for you'll find the kinnikinnick just after you leave the creek. It will be redder in the open places, so hunt for those. You'll love it for Christmas boxes. If it weren't for Cæsar, I'd go with you, but I want to finish the third book before Mary goes. Is it at the creek Carver's going to meet you?"

"There or at the crossroads," explained Vivian, as she mounted Siwash. "He went to town this morning with Donald, but he said he'd be back in

plenty of time. I tried to 'phone, but I guess there must be something wrong. I couldn't get any one, and it didn't buzz at all. But I know he'll be there, and I'm not a bit afraid of Siwash. Good-by."

Virginia stood on the porch and watched Vivian ride down the lane before returning to Cæsar. She was wondering if anything could be the matter, if, perhaps, something had happened at the barn-warming the evening before to displease Vivian. She had seemed so unlike herself all the morning.

But, she concluded wisely, few days were cloudless, and even an almost perfect house-party had its ups and downs. She and Donald had both discovered that. So many different personalities were bound to collide occasionally, and one couldn't be happy always. An afternoon on the mountain was sure to make Vivian's world bright again.

Meanwhile Vivian neared the crossroads. Carver was not there. A scanning of the prairie showed him nowhere in sight. She would ride up the canyon to the ford and wait there, she said to herself. When she rode, her thoughts were less

troublesome, and it was far easier to stick to her resolve.

Last evening, just as Mr. Benjamin Jarvis' guests were dispersing, she had made a hasty engagement with Carver to meet her the following afternoon and go for kinnikinnick up Cinnamon Creek. The search for kinnikinnick was not, however, her real reason for wishing to see Carver. If her courage did not fail her, and if her sudden resolve did not wane in the light of day, as resolves so often do, she was going to ask Carver to ride with her up Cinnamon Creek to the ranger's cabin, and there help her to apologize for their rudeness. To admit her regret to Carver would be even more difficult than to apologize to the ranger, and she was not at all sure that she should wish to do so in severely practical daylight.

Yet daylight had come—it was early afternoon of the next day—and she was still ready if Carver would only come. She allowed Siwash to sink his warm nose in the amber waters of the ford while she waited. It was very still up there. In fact, only Virginia's repeated assurances that there

were no cattle on the hills and her own knowledge that a homesteader's cabin was just out of sight beyond the quaking-asps on her left, made Vivian endure that stillness, broken only by the hurrying creek waters and the lazy humming of tiny, hidden insects.

To her right rose the mountain wall, dark with pine and spruce, though here and there a flaming service-berry or a hawthorn broke through the evergreens like sudden fire. The tangle of trees and shrubs seemed impenetrable, and yet Virginia had told of a trail which led from the creek not three rods from the ford—led up, up, up for five miles until it reached the Cinnamon Creek Station.

Why did not Carver come? She wished she could be as patient as Siwash who stood knee deep in the ford, hung his shaggy, homely head, and stole a nap gratefully. For the twentieth time Vivian rehearsed her speeches, the one to Carver and the other to the insulted ranger. That is, he had every cause to be insulted, though her memory of the smile with which he had received her thrust would seem to dispute his justifiable indignation. Perhaps

here in the mountains people were not so easily insulted. They, the mountains, were so big and generous that they made one ashamed of littleness.

Being sure of the speeches, she grew more and more impatient. Carver, waiting in Elk Creek for a stock train to load up with its living freight, was even more uneasy than she. He could not leave Donald and there was no way of letting Vivian know that he could not meet her at the ford. At last, having convinced himself that he could not help matters, he sat down on the station platform, disturbed in spirit and conscience, and hoped that Vivian had already turned back home.

But Vivian did not turn back. It grew hot by the ford, and she decided to tie Siwash in the shadow of some quaking-asps across the creek, and go up the trail herself to a shady place. Carver would see Siwash and call to her if she did not hear him come.

It was cool and shady beneath the trees that bordered the rocky trail. She would willingly have rested had not her eyes spied the red berries of

some kinnikinnick growing on either side of the path. Farther away in an open space she saw more and larger. They were far prettier than holly for Christmas boxes, and would be so different to her friends back East. She loved the tiny leaves and graceful trailing of the vines, which seemed hardly sturdy enough to hold the big, round, jolly-looking berries.

Virginia was right. They did grow more luxuriantly in the infrequent open places, and she climbed farther and farther up the mountain side, seeking like Hansel and Gretel for bigger berries than she had found. Sometimes she stood still and listened. The silence made a queer catch in her throat. Had it not been for her eagerness to find more and better kinnikinnick, and her knowledge that the homesteader's cabin was very near, she would have been frightened. But Carver must be there very soon, and though she often left the trail, the sound of the creek was proof against her being lost. Her own woodsman instinct was not strong, but Virginia had told her always to trust the creek, which would ever lead one down whence she had come.

Once her heart almost stopped beating. Away in the top of a great spruce she heard a hammering sound. It echoed through the silent woods like great blows of an ax, and some long moments passed before Vivian could assure her frightened heart that it was only a flicker searching for his dinner.

Her box was filled with kinnikinnick and she would go back. If Carver were not at the ford, they must make the trip up the trail the next day in spite of Virginia's plan for a ride to Lone Mountain. If necessary, she would be brave enough to explain matters, and then they would understand.

She turned to go down the mountain, when suddenly from above her came a sound of breaking underbrush as though some creature were bursting from its covert. Vivian stood motionless, too terrified to move or to scream. It was not Carver—that was certain. He would never be upon the mountain. It was far more likely to be a bear. Why not one here as well as farther up the canyon where they had caught that monster from the sight of which she had not yet recovered? Thoughts passed like flashes through her brain while that

awful sound of breaking twigs continued. Hundreds and hundreds of them came, crowding one another for space—thoughts of St. Helen's, snatches of poems she had learned, memories of things which had frightened her as a child. And last of all, perhaps because without knowing it she had reached a great tree and sunk in a little heap at its foot, came the picture of a sallow youth in eye-glasses and a linen duster, who had once, ages ago, crashed through some underbrush somewhere else!

The crashing ceased. Some one stepped into the trail above her. The thought of a bear had somehow given place to her old knight-errant of the soda-fountain. And yet when she looked up, expecting to see his pale, sickly countenance, she saw instead the khaki-clad form and the surprised blue eyes of the Cinnamon Creek forest ranger!

He was the very person she had wished to see. She could make her speech now, and be spared her long ride, and yet she found herself studying the line between his eyes and wondering why other people did not have a line there, too. It was the Cinnamon Creek forest ranger who spoke first.

"If that were an oak tree," he said, "I'd think you were consulting an oracle; but since it isn't, maybe you're just a Dryad who's fallen out of the branches. What are you doing away up here anyway? I guess you startled me almost as much as I seem to have startled you. I'm mighty sorry I scared you though!"

His apology made Vivian remember her own, and though she quite forgot her speech and just stammered out how sorry she was, the ranger liked it quite as well and assured her he should never think of it again.

"And now," he said, "since you've come away off up here, I'm not going to let you go home until you've seen my garden."

"Your garden?" queried Vivian. "Why, your cabin isn't here! It's——"

"I know," he interrupted, "but my garden is. Follow me. I'll show you. I promise there aren't any bears."

She followed him for half a mile up the trail. They wound around great bowlders and along the edges of steep, forbidding places. Then the ran-

ger paused before a thicket of yellow quaking-asps.

"This is the entrance," he explained. "Now prepare, for you're going to see something more wonderful than the hanging gardens of Nineveh."

Pushing aside the quaking-asps, he made a path for Vivian, who followed, mystified. A few moments more and they had passed the portals, and stood in the ranger's garden.

Vivian caught her breath. Never in her life had she seen such grandeur of color. They stood in an open place—a tiny valley surrounded by brown foot-hills. Beyond, the higher pine-clad mountains shut off the valley from the eyes of all who did not seek it. Some great, gray, overhanging rocks guarded the farther entrance. Within the inclosure, carpeting the valley and clothing the foot-hills, great masses of color glowed in the gold of the sunlight. The ranger's garden was a flaming pageant of yellow and bronze and orange, crimson and scarlet and purple between a cloudless, turquoise sky.

"Oh!" cried Vivian. "It's just like a secret, isn't

it, hidden away up here? I never saw such color in all my life, except in Thaïs, you know, where the women in Alexandria wore such beautiful gowns." Somehow she knew that the Cinnamon Creek forest ranger *did* know.

"Yes," he said understandingly, "I remember, only this is better than grand opera, because it's real. You see, I spotted this place last spring. I saw all the different shrubs—quaking-aspen and buckbrush and Oregon grape and service-berry and hawthorn and wild currant—and I thought to myself that this would be some garden in September. It's cold nights up here in these hills, the frosts are early, and the sun strikes this valley all day. It's going to be even more gorgeous in two weeks more. It isn't exactly on my beat, but it's near enough so I can make it. Come on. I'll show you all the different things."

So he led her from golden quaking-aspen to crimson hawthorn, and taught her the names of everything that grew in his wonderful garden. Before they had made the circle, Vivian mustered courage, and, seeing the jeweled pin upon the pocket of his

rough shirt, which his coat had covered the evening before, asked him about himself, and if Wyoming were his home.

No, he said, glad to tell her. He was from Maine, and the pin he wore was his fraternity pin. He had studied forestry in the university there, and then, becoming ill, had been sent West to get rid of a nasty cough which didn't want to go away. But the mountains had proven the best doctors in the world, and he was only staying on a year in the cabin at Cinnamon Creek to learn the mountain trees, and to add a few more pounds before going back home again.

Vivian grew more and more confused as she listened. Here he was a New Englander like herself, and she had been so rude. What would Carver say when he knew?

"It just shows," she said, "that we never can tell about persons on first acquaintance. I'm doubly sorry I was rude last night. I thought you didn't talk like a Westerner, but I didn't dream you were from New England!"

He smiled.

"I've learned since I've been out here," he said, "that it doesn't make any difference where we're from. Wyoming hearts are just like New England ones, and the only safe way is never to be rude or unkind at all."

Vivian agreed with him. She never would be again, she said to herself, as they left the garden and went back down the trail to Siwash and the ford. Carver was not there, and the ranger insisted upon walking home with her. He would not have stayed for supper had not Virginia and Aunt Nan, meeting them at the mail-box, persuaded him.

So it was a very merry party that ate supper beneath the cottonwoods—a party saddened only by the early good-night of the Cinnamon Creek ranger, who wanted to make his mountain cabin before darkness quite obliterated the trail. As he swung into the main road after some cordial handshakes which warmed his heart, he met Carver Standish III.

It was too nearly dark for Carver to see the fraternity pin, and no one had yet told him that

the ranger was from New England. Nevertheless, he straightened his shoulders, and held out his hand.

“I’ve wanted to see you, sir,” he said, “to tell you that I was an awful cad last night, and that I’m dead ashamed of it!”

CHAPTER XVII

THE WINTHROP COAT-OF-ARMS

PRISCILLA, sitting under the biggest cottonwood, was writing to Miss Wallace, in her best handwriting, on her best stationery, in her best style. One unconsciously brought forth the best she had for Miss Wallace. She was telling of the Emperor and of the Cinnamon Creek ranger, sure that Miss Wallace would be glad to add both to her collection of interesting people. Interruptions were many. Carver, moody and silent, rode over, looking for entertainment, and she did her best; Vivian, having reached a halt in her daily Latin review, asked assistance; little David, Alec's adorable son, had come over with his mother for the afternoon, and Priscilla found him irresistible; and at last Donald, riding homeward, hot and tired from working on the range, had stopped for rest and refreshment. With Hannah's help Priscilla had provided

the refreshment, and the ground beneath the cottonwood was giving the rest.

"Some stationery!" said Donald, raising himself on his elbow to look at the pile of sheets which Priscilla had placed in readiness on the grass. "A shield and an eagle and a lion and a unicorn all at once, to say nothing of Latin. What does it say? '*Courage—my—*'"

"*Courage is my heritage,*" translated Priscilla proudly. "It's our family coat-of-arms, and that's the motto. We've had it for years and years, ever since the Wars of the Roses. A Winthrop was shield-bearer for Edward, Duke of York, and Grandfather used to say we could be traced back to the Norman Conquest."

"I see," said Donald politely, but with something very like amusement in his blue eyes. "You New England folks are strong on crests and mottoes and that sort of thing, aren't you?"

"No more than we should be," announced Priscilla a little haughtily. "We are the oldest families for the most part, and I think we ought to remember all those things about our ancestors. It's—"

it's very—stimulating. The West is so excited over progress and developing the country and all that," she finished a little disdainfully, "that it doesn't care about family traditions or—or anything like that."

"Oh, I don't know," returned Donald. "It isn't so bad as that. We think a fine family history is a splendid thing. I venture I'm as proud of my Scotch forefathers as you are of the Duke of York's shield-bearer, though we haven't any coat-of-arms, and never did have any, I guess. Only back there you think it's a necessity to have a good ancestry, and out here we just consider it a help. I like what Burns said about a man being just a man. That's the way we feel out here. It isn't what you come from; it's what you *are*, and what you can do. Family mottoes are all right, if you live up to them. I knew a fellow at school when I was East two years ago. He roomed with me. He had the family coat-of-arms framed and hung on the wall. 'Twas all red and silver, and the motto was '*Ne cede malis*'—'Yield not to difficulties.' The funny part was that he was the biggest quitter

in school. You see, I think it's you who have to uphold the motto—not the motto that has to uphold you.”

Priscilla ate a cookie silently. She wished Donald were not so convincing.

“For instance,” Donald continued, “suppose *Courage is my heritage* were Vivian's family motto. Do you think that fact would give Vivian an extra amount of courage if she said it over a thousand times? I don't. All the courage Vivian's got she's gained for herself without any motto to help her out. And I guess that's the way with most of us in this world.”

He took his hat and rose to go.

“I've got to be making for home,” he said. “Dave's gone, and I've an extra amount of work to do. Thanks awfully for the cookies, and don't think I'm too hard on the family motto business. I can see where your motto means a heap to you, but you're not a quitter anyway, Priscilla.”

He jumped on MacDuff and rode down the lane with a final wave of his hat as he galloped homeward across the prairie. Priscilla's cheeks grew

red as she watched him. She was not any too sure that she was not a quitter. Disturbing memories came to trouble her—memories of occasions when she had not proven the truth of the motto, which had fired her ancestors. Donald was right, too, about ancestry and coats-of-arms and mottoes being only helps. Her New England conscience told her that, and her weeks in Wyoming corroborated her conscience. Still she was averse to admitting it—even to Donald.

She returned to her unfinished letter, but Genius seemed on a vacation. She could not picture the Emperor to Miss Wallace—could not give the impression which he had indelibly stamped upon her memory as he stood between Nero and Trajan at the palace entrance. The coat-of-arms seemed a disturbing element. She covered it with a strip of paper, but still thoughts would not come.

Disgruntled and out-of-sorts, she put away her letter, and started toward the house. Carver's mood was contagious, she said to herself. In Hannah's kitchen she found Mrs. Alec and little David, a roly-poly youngster of three who demanded too

much attention for just one mother. Priscilla, seeing in David a sure antidote for introspection, offered to play the part of the necessary other mother, and took him out-of-doors, much to the relief of tired Mrs. Alec. She had no more time to think of family mottoes or coats-of-arms. David clamored for attention, begged to be shown the horse, the dogs, and all the live-stock which the ranch afforded. Priscilla was an obedient guide. Nothing was omitted from the itinerary. When David, satisfied as to the other four-footed possessions, said "Pigs" in his funny Scotch way, pigs it was!

She led him down the hill to the corral, then off toward the right where the pigs had their abiding-place. A pile of rocks, the crevices of which were filled with all weeds infesting the neighborhood of pigs, offered a vantage-ground from which they might view the landscape so alluring to little David. With his hand in hers, she was helping him mount the rocks one by one.

Suddenly a miniature saw-mill whirled at their feet. A swarm of bees filled the air! Priscilla, intent upon David, had not noticed the flat sur-

face of the rock where the sun lay warm and bright. Warned by the strange sound, her terrified eyes saw the snake, coiled and ready to spring! She had a fleeting vision of a flat, cruel head, and a thousand diamond-shaped yellow dots as she grasped little David by the neckband and pulled him from the rocks to the corral. It was a rattlesnake! The brakeman's prophecy had come true! In spite of Virginia's assertion that they never came near the house, she had seen one!

Little David was crying from surprise and a sore neck. He had not seen the snake. Priscilla was trembling in every muscle. There was no one whom she could call. The men were on the range and in the fields; Mr. Hunter and the girls, except Vivian, were in town; Aunt Nan was at the Keiths. The snake must not be allowed to live. Little David might be playing around there again, or some other child. She herself would never, never have the courage——! She started, for suddenly in place of the sound of the saw-mill and the vision of the diamond-shaped dots, came the memory of a lion rampant on a field of gold, an eagle perched upon

a shield, and a unicorn surrounded by stars. As the red came back into her white cheeks, Donald's words came back also:

"You see, you're no quitter anyway, Priscilla!"

Two minutes later Mrs. Alec and Hannah were surprised to receive into their midst a shrieking child, borne by a most determined girl, who was almost out of breath.

"He's all right!" she gasped. "Except his neck, I mean! I dragged him. I had to! I'll tell you why by and by. Keep him till I get back!"

Then she flew out of the house and down the path to the stables. A many-tined pitchfork rested against one of the sheds. It was one which William had used that morning in turning over sod for a new flower-bed. Priscilla in her hurried transit with David had marked the fork, and chosen it as her best weapon. Of all those cruel tines, one must surely be successful. Donald had told tales of forked sticks and heavy stones, but her hands were too inexperienced for those things.

She seized the fork and ran down the path toward the rocks, not daring to stop lest her resolve

should fail her; not even waiting to plan her attack lest the memory of that awful head should send her back to the kitchen.

The saw-mill whirred again as she neared the rock. Apparently the snake had not stirred since his last conquest. This time she saw his wicked little eyes, his flattened head, and the contraction of his diamond-covered muscles as he made ready to spring. But Priscilla sprang first. The tines of the heavy pitchfork pierced the coils, and the only whirr which sounded was the whirr of iron against the rock.

Priscilla, on the rock below, held the handle of the pitchfork firmly, and tried not to look at her victim as he writhed in agony. A sickness was creeping over her. There were queer vibrations in the air, and a strange, singing sound in her ears. Memory brought back the picture of an evening in Carver Standish's room at the Gordon School when she had felt the same way. She would not faint, she said to herself, rallying all her forces. She would die first! The snake had ceased writhing. He was surely dead. Little David need be no

longer in danger, and she—perhaps she need not feel so unworthy when she thought of the Winthrop coat-of-arms.

She was very white when she reached the kitchen, after depositing the pitchfork and its burden by the shed. Grateful Mrs. Alec cried and held little David closer when Priscilla, fortified by Hannah's cider, told the story. Alec, who came in a few minutes later, was grateful, too, in his bluff Scotch way. The snake, he said, was a whopper. He had rarely seen a larger, and Miss Priscilla was a trump—the very bravest tenderfoot he'd ever seen!

She had been true to her heritage, Donald said that evening—worthy to bear the Winthrop coat-of-arms. But then he knew she wasn't a quitter anyway. He had told her so that very afternoon.

But Priscilla's honesty was equal to all the demands placed upon it that night. Donald's praise was but the last straw!

"All the coats-of-arms and family mottoes in the world, Donald," she said, "couldn't have made me kill that snake. It was what you said about them, and about me not being a quitter that did it. I

think I was a quitter until this afternoon; but now I can go and write Miss Wallace without covering up the top of the paper. I'm going to do it before bed-time, if you'll excuse me. Good-night!"

CHAPTER XVIII

A GOOD SPORT

"WHEW!" sighed Vivian, shifting her position in the saddle for the tenth time in as many minutes, and taking off her broad-brimmed hat to fan her tanned, flushed face. "I think sagebrush must attract the sun. I never was hotter in all my life! I wish now we'd stayed at the Buffalo Horn and waited till after supper to start back. Of course I don't exactly love riding in the dark, but of the two I'd about as soon be scared to death as baked. Where is the next shady spot, Virginia? I can't see a tree for miles! I honestly can't!"

"There aren't any," said the comforting Virginia, brushing back the damp rings of hair from her hot forehead, "and the next shady spot is two miles away. The trail bends and there are some quaking-asps by a spring. We'll rest there, and eat our cookies, and drink some real water. 'Twill be a change from the river."

"I'm thankful for the river though, even if I have drunk all kinds of bugs. I guess we'd have died without it through all these miles of sagebrush. When will the others get home, do you suppose?"

"Not until late," Virginia answered, "that is, if they wait for supper. I'd have loved to have stayed, but William wants Pedro for the range to-morrow, and I wanted him to have a longer rest. Besides, he runs so with the other horses and gets nervous. You were a peach to come with me, Vivian. Right in the hottest part of the day, too."

Vivian was honest.

"It wasn't all out of kindness," she admitted, "though, of course, I love to ride with you. I didn't especially care about riding home at night, and I don't like such a big crowd either. Siwash always forgets how old he is, and begins to act kittenish, and I never know what to do. I'm thirsty again. Shall we drink a few more bugs?"

"Might as well, I suppose," Virginia replied. "Pedro and Siwash seem ready. Ugh! I got one that time! Actually felt him go down my

throat! We ought not to put water on our faces, Vivian. They're peeling now! Here's some cold cream!"

Vivian squeezed the tube and smeared her glowing nose, before she again mounted Siwash.

"We mustn't drink any more of the river," she said. "I feel like an insect cabinet already. Let's get to the quaking-asps as soon as we can and rest."

Virginia's eyes glowed with pride as she watched Vivian mount Siwash and ride away from the river. One would never have known it was the same Vivian who nearly seven weeks ago had begged to stay at home from the getting-acquainted trip. She had learned to ride well and easily, and no apparent fear, at least of Siwash, remained. With still more pride Virginia saw her tanned, happy face, the red color in her cheeks, and the extra pounds which Wyoming had given her. The Big Horn country had been kind to Vivian in more ways than one.

"I never saw any one improve so in riding, Vivian," she could not resist saying. "You do every

bit as well as Priscilla, and Don thinks she's a marvel. I'm proud as Punch of you!"

Vivian's cheeks glowed redder.

"I can't help but be a tiny bit pleased with myself," she said hesitatingly, "at least about the riding. And—and there are other things, too, Virginia. Of course I know there have been loads of silly things—Mr. Crusoe, for instance. I'll never forget how awful that was, even though you were all so fine about it. But in spite of everything foolish, I have learned things out here, Virginia, that I never knew in all my life. Mother and Father probably won't see any difference next week when I get home, but there is some just the same. I'm not quite such a—a coward as I was! I feel it inside!"

"I know you do," said Virginia, riding Pedro closer. "It shows on your face, too. I guess what's really inside of us usually does. You're getting to be a good sport, Vivian, and we're all proud of it—with you!"

The knowledge of Virginia's approval somehow made the mid-day heat less intense, and

the two miles to the quaking-asps less long. It was good to reach them, and to lie at full length on the cool ground before drinking from the spring a few steps away. Pedro and Siwash were grateful, too, as they cropped the sweet, moist grass. A half hour here would sustain them against the three miles of sagebrush beyond.

Virginia and Vivian lay flat on their backs with their arms straight above their heads and rested, as they had been taught to do at St. Helen's. Above them the interlaced branches of the quaking-asps shut out the sun. The air was still with that strange stillness which sometimes comes before a storm. Even the ever-active leaves of the quaking-asps moved not at all.

"It's the stillest place I ever knew," said Vivian, as she reached for a cookie. "How far is it to the nearest house?"

Virginia considered.

"Six miles," she said. "No, there's a homesteader's cabin nearer. That's about four, I guess, but Michner's, the cattle ranch, is six. We always



“ HE WAS LEANING FORWARD IN HIS SADDLE AND CLUTCH-
ING THE HORN ”

call them the nearest neighbors from here. It is still, isn't it?"

"Awfully!" returned Vivian.

Their words were hardly finished when the sound of hoofs broke the stillness. Pedro and Siwash snorted. Virginia and Vivian sat up quickly—one interested, the other alarmed. Some one was coming along the rough trail through the sagebrush. Some one was very near! They peered through the quaking-asps. The some one was a lone cow boy riding a buckskin horse. He was leaning forward in his saddle and clutching the horn. His face, almost covered by the big hat he wore, was close to the black mane of the sturdy little buckskin.

From their shelter they watched him draw near with beating hearts. There was something strange about him—strange as the stillness. They could not see that he was guiding the horse, who apparently knew not only the way, but her mission as well. She came straight toward the shady thicket and stopped beneath the trees a few rods away from the two anxious spectators. Her rider, conscious perhaps from the halt that he had reached

his destination, loosened his hold upon the saddlehorn, swung himself with a mighty effort from the saddle, and fell upon the ground, his hat all unnoticed falling from his head.

The buckskin was apparently worried. She sniffed the air dubiously, snorted an anxious greeting to Pedro and Siwash, and moved to one side, lest by mistake she should tread upon her master, who lay in a motionless heap close beside her. Then Virginia's quick eyes discovered blood upon the man's head and face. She jumped to her feet.

"He's hurt somehow, Vivian," she said, "terribly hurt, I'm afraid. We mustn't leave him like this. He might die here all alone! Come on! Let's see what we can do."

Vivian, too surprised to remonstrate, followed Virginia through the quaking-asps. The man lay where he had fallen, unconscious of anything about him. Blood was flowing from an ugly wound just above his forehead. He was a sad and sorry sight. Vivian shuddered and drew back.

"Who is he, Virginia?" she breathed. "You know who he is, don't you? Oh, what are you

going to do?" For Virginia's strong young arms were trying to pull the man into a more comfortable position, and farther beneath the trees.

"No, I don't know who he is," she whispered, fanning the man's white face with her broad-brimmed hat. "That doesn't make any difference. He's awfully hurt! I thought at first 'twas a shot, but I guess he's fallen. It looks like that. The horse belongs to Michner's. I know by the brand. Fan him, Vivian, while I fix his head and see if he has any whisky about him anywhere."

The dazed and frightened Vivian obediently took the fan, and turning her face away, frantically fanned the quaking-asps until they danced and fluttered once more. Virginia untied the cow boy's slicker from the back of the buckskin's saddle and folded it into a pillow, which she placed beneath the sick man's head. The buckskin was relieved and whinnied her thanks. Then from one pocket she drew a small, leathern flask and shook it.

"Empty!" she said. "Hard luck! Water will have to do. We were careless to forget our drink-

ing-cups. Rinse this flask, and get some water from the spring, Vivian."

Vivian, still waving the fan in the air, brought the water, which Virginia tried to pour between the man's lips. It seemed to arouse him, for he drank some gratefully, though without opening his eyes.

"I ought to wash some of this blood away," said Virginia, "but I guess I won't take the time. You can do that after I'm gone. There's only one thing to do. We can't leave this man here in this condition. He might die before any one found him. I'll take Pedro and ride on to Michner's as fast as I can for help. Or," she added, seeing Vivian's eyes open wider, "*you* take him, and I'll stay here. Either you like, only we must decide at once. Maybe we'll meet somebody or somebody'll come, or maybe there'll be somebody at the homesteader's cabin. Which will you do, ride or stay?"

Vivian had decided before she looked at Pedro. She always felt that Pedro entertained scorn for her, contempt that wild gallops through the sagebrush should, together with his youth and speed,

present terrors. She knew that he despised her for preferring Siwash to him.

"I'll stay," she said firmly. "Pedro will do more for you than for me. When will you be back?"

Virginia was already in the saddle.

"Probably in little more than an hour, if I find folks," she said. "Keep giving him some water if he needs it, and fan him. He may come to. Good-by."

The sound of Pedro's feet died away all too quickly. The stillness which followed was deeper than ever. It fairly sang in the air. For fully five minutes Vivian stood motionless, loath to believe that Virginia had gone. She did not want to be alone! Something inside of her cried out against it. But she *was* alone—she, Vivian Winters, alone with a dying cow boy on a limitless Wyoming plain. Since the relentless knowledge pushed itself upon her, she might as well accept it. *She was alone!* And there was the cow boy!

Virginia had said that he might come to! For her own sake she hoped he didn't. He was awful enough as he was—blood-smeared and dirty—but

at least he did not realize the situation, and that was a scant comfort. If he came to, he might be insane. Blows on the head often made persons so. Given insanity and a gun, what would be the demonstration?

A low groan from the quaking-asp thicket brought Vivian to herself. Imagination had no place here. This man was hurt, and she was strong and well. There was a spring of water near by, and she had extra handkerchiefs in her pocket. It was plainly up to her!

The stillness was less persistent after she had gone to the spring for water. She forgot all about it as she knelt beside the wounded man and washed the blood from his pain-distorted face. He opened his eyes as he felt the cold cloths, and Vivian saw that they were good, blue eyes. They, together with the absence of blood and dirt, told her that her patient was young—only a boy, in fact! The cut on his head was ugly! Something fluttered inside of her as she parted his hair to place a clean handkerchief upon it, and for a moment she was ill and faint. The cow boy's "Thank you, miss," brought

her to herself. Perhaps he was coming to! It was not so awful as she had thought.

But he again fell asleep, cleaner and more comfortable than before. The buckskin whinnied her thanks, and put her nose against Vivian's arm as she went to the spring for more water. For the first time in her life Vivian felt the comradeship, the dumb understanding of a horse. Then Siwash became glorified. He was something more than a ragged, decrepit old pony. He was a companion, and Vivian stopped to pat him before she hurried back to her patient.

Upon her return from her third journey after water, she found the cow boy's eyes again open. This time he had raised himself on his elbow and was looking at her. He had come to, and it was not horrible at all. Her only feeling was one of alarm lest his sitting up should cause his wound to bleed again, and she hurried to him.

"You're feeling better, aren't you?" she faltered. "But you'd better lie down. You've got a pretty bad cut on your head."

The boy smiled in a puzzled way.

"I don't seem to remember much," he said, "except the header. My horse fell when I wa'n't expectin' it, and I went on a rock. 'Twas the only one on the prairie, I guess, but it got me for sure. What are you doin' here, miss? I don't seem to remember you."

Vivian explained as simply as possible. She and her friend had been resting when his horse brought him to the quaking-asps. One of them had gone for help, and the other had stayed. She was the other.

"You're not from these parts, I take it," said the boy, still puzzled. "You don't speak like us folks."

"No," Vivian told him, "I'm from the East. I came out here six weeks ago to visit my friend."

Her patient looked surprised and raised himself again on his elbow in spite of Vivian's restraining hand.

"So much of a tenderfoot as that?" he said, gazing at her. "They ain't usually such good sports as you are, miss. Yes, thank you, I'll have some more water. It's right good, I tell you!"

Then he fell asleep again, and left Vivian to the

companionship of Siwash and the buckskin. Her patient comfortable, she fed them the remaining cookies, wondering as she did so where the awful sense of loneliness had gone. She should welcome Virginia—already it was time for her—but the knowledge that she must stay another hour would not present such terrors to her.

It was Siwash who first caught the sound of returning hoofs—Siwash and the relieved buckskin. They neighed and told Vivian, who ran from the thicket to see if they were right. Yes, there was Virginia, with Pedro still in the lead, and two men on horseback behind her. She had luckily met them a mile this side of Michner's, and hurried them back with her. The cow boy had again raised himself, as they rode up to him and dismounted. He was better, for he could look sheepish! This being thrown from one's horse was a foolish thing!

They would stay with him, the men said. They knew him well. He was called "Scrapes" at Michner's because he was always getting into trouble. This last was the worst yet. They would camp there that night, and in the morning he could ride home,

they felt sure. They were grateful to the girls. Scrapes was a likeable chap, and no one wanted him hurt.

But Scrapes himself was the most grateful. He staggered to his feet as Vivian went up to tell him good-by and shook hands with her, and then with Virginia. But his eyes were for Vivian.

"You're the best tenderfoot I ever knew, miss," he said. "You was sure some good sport to take care o' me. Would you take my quirt? It's bran new, and I made it all myself. Get it off my horn, Jim. Yes, I want you to have it. Good-by!"

"Scrapes is right," said Virginia, as they left the thicket and started homeward. "I said a while ago that you were getting to be one, Vivian, but now I know you've got there—for sure!"

CHAPTER XIX

CARVER STANDISH III FITS IN

CARVER STANDISH III hated the world, himself, and everybody else—at least, he thought he did. In fact, he had been so sure of it all day that no one had attempted any argument on the subject. Jack, unable to maneuver a fishing-trip and secretly glad of an escape, had ridden over to Mary with some much-needed mending; Donald had been glad to ride on the range on an errand for his father; Mr. Keith was in town; the whereabouts of Malcolm could easily be guessed.

Carver, in white trousers and a crimson Gordon sweater, was idly roaming about the ranch in search of any diversion which might present itself, and which did not require any too much exertion. For two weeks and more things had not been going well with him. His stay in Wyoming was not closing so happily as it had begun—all due, he admitted to himself, to a missed opportunity. For had he seized

the chance when it was given him on the morning after that disastrous night on the mountain, and taken the laugh he had so richly deserved, by now the incident, like Vivian's affair with Mr. Crusoe, would be forgotten. Instead, he had accepted ill-gotten commendation, and received with it the well-disguised scorn of Virginia. This last was the worst of all.

He wandered down to the corral. If there were a horse around he might change his clothes and ride. Dave was there, repairing some harnesses. There were no horses down, he said, except old Ned. They were all on the range. Carver might ride Ned, or take him to round up the others. For a moment Carver thought of asking Dave to do the service for him, but the determined set of the old Scotchman's jaw warned him in time. Dave was averse to taking orders from a tenderfoot. It was too much like work, Carver concluded, to round up a decent horse, and to ride Ned would not alleviate his present mood. He would walk.

Old Dave, intent on his harnesses, did not see Carver jump the farther boundary of the corral.

Had he done so, he would have shouted a warning not to stray too far on foot across the range. The cattle were being driven farther down toward the ranch, and they were often averse to solitary persons on foot.

Carver, all unperceived, climbed the foot-hills, his hands deep in his pockets, his eyes on the ground. It was all a bad mess, he thought, and how to get out of it, he didn't know. Of one thing he was certain: the West was not the place for *him*. The dreams in which he had lived only three weeks ago—dreams of opening a branch of his father's business in the West when he should have finished college—had vanished. He had now decided he was born to remain a New Englander. There were things about the West which he didn't like—blunt, unpolished, new things. Of course these ranchers didn't mind crudities. They could fraternize with ordinary cow-punchers. Even Donald could do that. But *he* had been reared differently. He struck his toe against a rock, which he kicked savagely out of his way. No, the Standishes were New Englanders, and there they would remain!

He reached the brow of the first foot-hills, crossed an open space, and climbed others to the open range above. When he again reached a level he stopped in surprise. Never had he seen so many cattle. There were literally hundreds of them. Where had they all come from? He stood still and stared at them, and they with one accord stopped browsing and stared at him. They were unaccustomed to persons strolling on foot across their preserves. For an instant Carver Standish felt a strange sense of fear. There was something portentous in the way a big red and white bull in the foreground was staring at him. Then he saw Donald on horseback off to the right, and waved his hand. But Donald, spying the white trousers and the red sweater in the same instant, did not stop to wave. Instead, he struck MacDuff with his spur, skirted the cattle nearest him, and rode madly down toward Carver and those ahead.

"He's crazy," he said to himself, "coming up here in that rig and afoot. Old Rex will never stand it for a moment."

He was right. Old Rex had not the slightest inten-

tion of standing it. He ate no more, but with lowered head gazed at this curiously clad intruder, who was hesitating, not knowing whether to advance or to turn back. Old Rex decided for him. He did the advancing. One shake of his heavy head, crowned with long, sharp horns, one cloud of dust as he pawed the ground, and one tremendous bellow warned Carver Standish III to do no tarrying in that locality.

A shout from Donald following Old Rex's roar determined Carver's direction. He fled toward MacDuff at a speed which would have won any twenty-five yard cup in New England! Old Rex followed. The other cattle, curiously enough and much to Donald's relief, let their champion fight it out alone.

Donald, every moment drawing nearer, freed his left foot from the stirrup. Carver must somehow be made to jump behind the saddle, and jump quick! There was not an instant to lose. Old Rex was gaining, and Carver was growing tired. It was too hot up there for a red sweater. With the bull a scant thirty feet away Donald pulled in MacDuff,

and yelled to Carver to jump, which he did, aided by the stirrup, Donald's arm, and the last bit of ancestral nerve he possessed. When Old Rex, baffled and defeated, saw his foe being championed by one whom he full well knew, it took but a yell from Donald and a mighty crack of his quirt to send him back among the herd.

There seemed little enough to say as MacDuff bore his double load down over the hills to the lower range, where white trousers and red sweaters might be countenanced. But something had returned to Carver, something which for two weeks had been on a vacation. As they neared the home foot-hills, he slid from MacDuff.

"If you're not in a hurry, Don," he said, "let's rest here a minute. MacDuff is tired, I know, and there are some things I want to get straightened out before we go down home."

The next afternoon while Jack searched the ranch for his scattered possessions and tried in vain to stow them all away in his trunk, while three crest-fallen girls packed at the Hunter ranch, Carver,



"DONALD PULLED IN MACDUFF, AND YELLED TO CARVER TO
JUMP"

fresh from an interview with Mr. Keith, sat down to write his father. The letter, received four days later in place of its author by the Standish family, brought surprise and consternation in its wake.

"I simply can't understand it," said Mrs. Carver Standish II, on the verge of hysterical tears. "I've never known him to do such a thing before. There's Ruth Sherman's house-party coming off, and the St. Clair wedding, and the tennis tournament, and our trip to the Adirondacks—and everything! Whatever shall I tell people who inquire? There's something wrong with him, Carver! I never did want him to go to that place, anyway. You'd better wire!"

"I can't see but that it's plain enough," said his father. "He simply prefers threshing on a Wyoming ranch to a house-party or a wedding or a tennis tournament or the Adirondacks. Let him alone. Maybe a little work won't hurt him."

"Hurt him!" cried a certain gray-haired old gentleman, slapping his knees. "Hurt him! It'll be the best thing that ever happened to him, in *my* opinion! Work, and being with that little girl out there!"

"And I did so want Mrs. Van Arsdale to see him!" continued his mother. "I'd planned all sorts of things for September. Read the letter again, Carver."

Mr. Carver Standish II read the letter. It was brief and to the point.

"DEAR DAD:

"I'm not coming home till school opens. I'm going to stay out here and help thresh. Mr. Keith is short on hands, and he says I'll do. I wanted to help for nothing, they've all been so good to me—but he says I mustn't. You needn't send me any money, because I'm going to be earning two dollars a day, and maybe three if I'm any good. Please don't let Mother object. It won't do any good anyhow, because I've already signed a contract to stay. Mr. Keith didn't want to draw it up, but I insisted. He does it with the other men, and I'm no better than the rest.

"I've got a great scheme about bringing the business West when I'm through college. It sure is some country out here! Love to Grandfather.

"CARVER."

That Carver Standish III preferred threshing on a Wyoming ranch to a house-party was the subject of conversation at every social affair for a week and more. Poor Mrs. Carver Standish II found explanations most difficult.

"Carver's so in love with the country and riding and all that he just won't come back," she said.

But Carver's grandfather, the old Colonel, found no such difficulty.

"My grandson," he said, his fine head thrown back, and his blue eyes glowing with pride, "my grandson is discovering the dignity of labor on a Wyoming ranch!"

CHAPTER XX

COMRADES

WYOMING, to be appreciated, should be explored on horseback and not viewed from the observation platform of a limited train. Barren stretches of sagebrush and cactus, and grim, ugly buttes guard too well the secret that golden wheat-fields lie beyond them; the rugged, faraway mountains never tell that their canyon-cut sides are clothed with timber and carpeted with a thousand flowers; and tired, dusty travelers, quite unaware of these things, find themselves actually longing for Nebraska to break the monotony!

The half-dozen weary persons who on the afternoon of September 6th sat on the observation platform of the Puget Sound Limited, together with the scores who peered from its windows in vain search of something besides sagebrush, were no exception to the rule. To a man, they were all giving fervent

thanks that Fate had cast their lots in California or New England or, at the worst, Iowa. The assurances of the brakeman, who was loquacious beyond his kind, that once past Elk Creek they would strike a better country brought some much-needed cheerfulness; and Elk Creek itself afforded such amusement and entertainment that they really began to have a better impression of Wyoming. Apparently, there were civilized persons even in so desolate an environment as this!

The sources of their entertainment, for they were several, stood on the little station platform at Elk Creek. The central figure was a tall, middle-aged man, whose hands were filled with trunk checks and tickets, and to whom three very excited girls were saying good-by all at the same time. Three boys, two in khaki and one in traveling clothes, were shaking hands heartily; a fresh-faced young woman with marigolds at her waist stood a little apart from the others and talked earnestly with a tall young man; and a hatless, brown-haired girl in a riding suit seemed to be everywhere at once.

"Oh, I can't bear to think it's all over!" the inter-

ested travelers heard her say, as she embraced the three girls in turn. "It's been absolutely the most perfect six weeks I've ever, ever known. Don't lose your quirt, Vivian! And don't leave Allan's knife around, Mary. It isn't fair to tempt even a porter. You'll write from every large place, won't you, Priscilla?"

In spite of an amused and impatient conductor, the last-named girl turned back for a last hug. Her hat was askew, her brown hair disheveled, and her brown eyes full of tears, which were coursing freely down her cheeks.

"Oh, Virginia," she cried, "you're the biggest peach I ever knew! Remember, you're going to think of me every night at seven o'clock. It'll be nine for me in Boston, but I'll not forget. And it's only three weeks before I see you again. That's a comfort!"

She hurried toward the waiting train, at the steps of which a boy in khaki stood ready to help her.

"Good-by, Carver," she cried, shaking hands for at least the fourth time. "I'm going to see your

grandfather the very first thing and tell him what a good sport you are!"

A mad rush for the observation platform ensued—the three girls, the boy, and the young woman reaching it just in time to wave good-by to those left behind. The brown-eyed girl swept the faces of her fellow travelers at one glance, nodded to the interested brakeman with a surprised and pleased smile, and then, just as the train began to move, hurried to the railing.

"Oh, Virginia!" she cried to the girl in the riding-suit. "What do you think! I've got the very same brakeman! Doesn't that make the ending just perfect?"

Two hours later a boy and a girl on horseback forded Elk Creek, rode up the Valley, and to the summit of the highest foot-hill.

"I'm glad we rode up here," said Virginia. "I'm missing them already, and to be up here with you helps a lot! Do you remember a year ago, Don? 'Twas in this very spot that we planned and planned, and the day was just like this, too—all clear and

golden. It just seems as though every year is lovelier than the last, and this one has been the very loveliest of all my life."

"I guess," said Donald thoughtfully, leaning forward in his saddle to pat MacDuff, "I guess it's been the best of my life, too, counting this summer and all. Last year at school was great, with college always ahead—sort of a dream almost true, you know. And then to have Jack and Carver here, and all the girls with you, finished everything up just right. But the best part of the year to me, Virginia," he finished hesitatingly, "was June when you came back, and I found you weren't a young lady after all. I was some glad, I tell you!"

Virginia's gray eyes looked at the mountains, swept the golden prairie stretches, and lingered for a long moment on the cottonwoods which bordered Elk Creek before they came back to Donald's blue ones.

"I'm glad, too," she said simply.

Pedro and MacDuff sniffed the September air and gloried in it. They were impatient for a wild run across the brow of the hills, and wondered why their

riders chose to look so long at the mountains on such an afternoon as this. If they sat so silently much longer, there would be no time to make the mesa, to gallop across its wide surface, and at last, perhaps, to have supper among the sagebrush with Robert Bruce. They felt somewhat encouraged when Virginia began to speak.

"I've been trying to decide the very loveliest thing of all the year," she said. "I mean from September to June. I don't know whether 'twas the Vigilantes or Miss Wallace or Grandmother Webster, but I'm almost sure 'twas Grandmother Webster learning to love Father. The others were joys for me, but that was one for all of us. Of course we know the loveliest thing of this summer. Everything's been perfect, but Aunt Nan and Malcolm the most perfect of all. Yesterday, when Grandmother Webster's letter came, I just cried for joy, it was so lovely!

"I—I couldn't help comparing it with the one she wrote Mother about Father," she continued, a little break in her voice. "I found it—afterward—in Mother's things. She didn't understand at all then.

I guess it takes some people a long time to understand things. But I'm going to try to forget that, because Grandmother Webster knows now just how splendid Father is. Besides," she finished thoughtfully, "it's going to be very hard for Grandmother to give Aunt Nan up. I guess we can't even imagine how hard it's going to be."

"Of course we can't. I think it's fine of her to take it the way she does. What relation will that make you and me?" he finished practically.

"Priscilla and I figured it all out. You're no relation at all—just my uncle's brother. Makes you sound about forty-five, doesn't it?"

"It doesn't sound exactly young. When do you suppose it will happen?"

"Aunt Nan doesn't know. Malcolm says Christmas, but she says no, she must have a year with Grandmother. So I think it will be in June—just after school is out. Webster is lovely then—all filled with daisies and buttercups and wild roses. And you'll come on, Don—of course you will. And Priscilla will be there, and Mary and Vivian and Carver and Jack and maybe Dorothy! I want you

to see Dorothy. Oh, won't it be the happiest time? I'm getting excited already!"

"The horses want to go," said Donald. "I'll race you to the edge of the mesa. Come on!"

Five minutes later they looked at each other, red-cheeked and radiant.

"In together, just as usual," cried Donald. "There's never much difference!"

"My hair makes me think of Priscilla," said Virginia, brushing back some loose locks and re-tying her ribbon. "Wasn't she funny this afternoon when she said good-by, her hat on one side and her hair all falling down, and her eyes full of tears? I can't help saying all over and over how lovely it's been. And now another year's beginning, and in two weeks more you and I will go away to school again. I'm wondering," she finished thoughtfully, "I'm wondering if next June, when we ride up here, you'll say that I'm not a young lady after all."

"You don't feel you're going to be—too grown-up, do you?" There was anxiety in Donald's tone.

"No, not in the way you mean," Virginia prom-

ised him. "Not ever like Imogene or Katrina Van Rensaelar. But I *am* growing up! I feel it coming! It's just as though I'd met my older self and shaken hands with her before she went away again, for, you see, she hasn't come to stay for keeps yet. I think she came the first time when Jim went away, and then again at Easter time when Miss King talked to us at Vespers, and then this summer when Aunt Nan told me about Malcolm. That time she stayed longest of all."

"I hope she won't be a lot different from you," said Donald. "I shouldn't want to have to get acquainted all over again."

"You won't," Virginia assured him. "Only she knows a lot more than I know, and she's told me a great many things already. That night on the mountain she came and stayed with me while Vivian and Carver were asleep. I learned so many things that night, Don. I'm just sure she taught them to me—she and the night and the stillness." Her voice softened. "Somehow, away up there on the mountain, life seemed such a big, wonderful thing—all full of dreams and opportunities and surprises and

—and comrades, all going along the same trail. Don't you like to think of life as a trail—like the kind that leads to Lone Mountain, I mean—all full of dangers and surprises and beautiful things?"

"Yes," he said simply. His eyes as he watched her filled with pride in their comradeship—his and hers.

"And, oh, that makes me think!" she cried excitedly. "I've forgotten to tell you about the poem Miss Wallace sent me yesterday. You see, I'm collecting lovely ones, and she's such a help in sending them to me. I learned this one to say to you. Of course she didn't know, but it's just like we were the Christmas before I went away to school when you were home for the holidays. Don't you remember how we went for Christmas greens up Bear Canyon in that big snow-storm and didn't get home until long after dark, and how Jim and William were just starting to hunt for us? Listen! I know you'll like it. It's called 'Comrades.'

"'You need not say one word to me as up the hill we go
(Night-time, white-time, all in the whispering snow),

296 Virginia of Elk Creek Valley

You need not say one word to me, although the whisper-
ing trees
Seem strange and old as pagan priests in swaying mys-
teries.

“You need not think one thought of me as up the trail
we go
(Hill-trail, still-trail, all in the hiding snow),
You need not think one thought of me, although a hare
runs by,
And off behind the tumbled cairn we hear a red fox cry.

“Oh, good and rare it is to feel as through the night
we go
(Wild-wise, child-wise, all in the secret snow)
That we are free of heart and foot as hare and fox are
free,
And yet that I am glad of you, and you are glad of
me!”

“Don’t you like it, Don?” she finished eagerly. “I do. I like it because I think it shows the finest kind of friendship—the kind that makes you free to do just what seems right and best to *you*, and yet makes you glad of your friends. Miss Wallace calls it the friendship which doesn’t *demand*, and it’s her ideal, too. I’m sure she was thinking of that when she sent me the poem. And then I like it most

of all because it makes me think of that Christmas, and the good time we had. Don't you like it?" she repeated.

In her eagerness she was all unconscious that she had given him no time to reply.

"Yes," he said. "I should say I do like it. I guess I'll copy it, if you don't mind. And, Virginia," he added, hesitating, "you don't know what our comradeship means to me. You see, when a fellow goes away to college the way I'm going, it helps him to be—to be on the square in everything, if he has a comrade like—like you've always been."

But there was no hesitation—only gladness in Virginia's frank gray eyes as she looked at him.

"Oh, I'm so glad!" she cried, her face flooded with happiness. "That's the very kind of a comrade I want to be, Don! I like to feel just as it says in the poem:

"That we are free of heart and foot as hare and fox are
free,

And yet that I am glad of you, and you are glad of
me!"

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